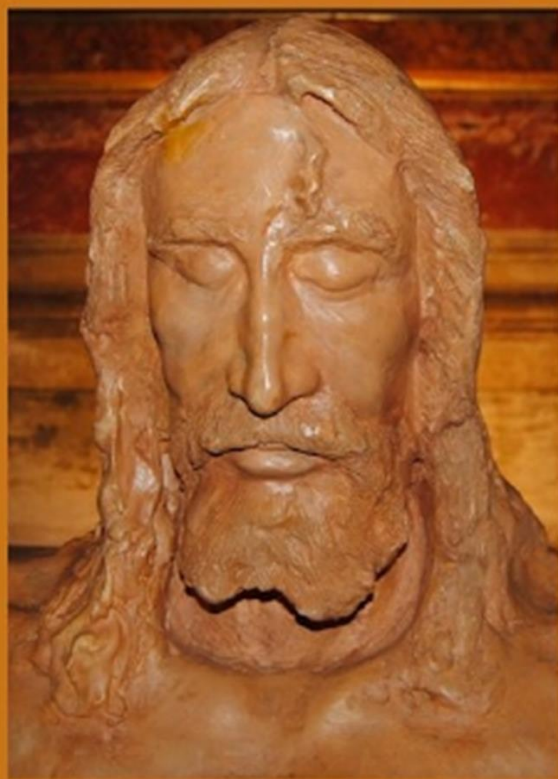


Son of God

The Daily Gospel Year A - 2



Fr. Edward J. Tyler

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The Daily Gospel A-2

Published With Ecclesiastical Approval

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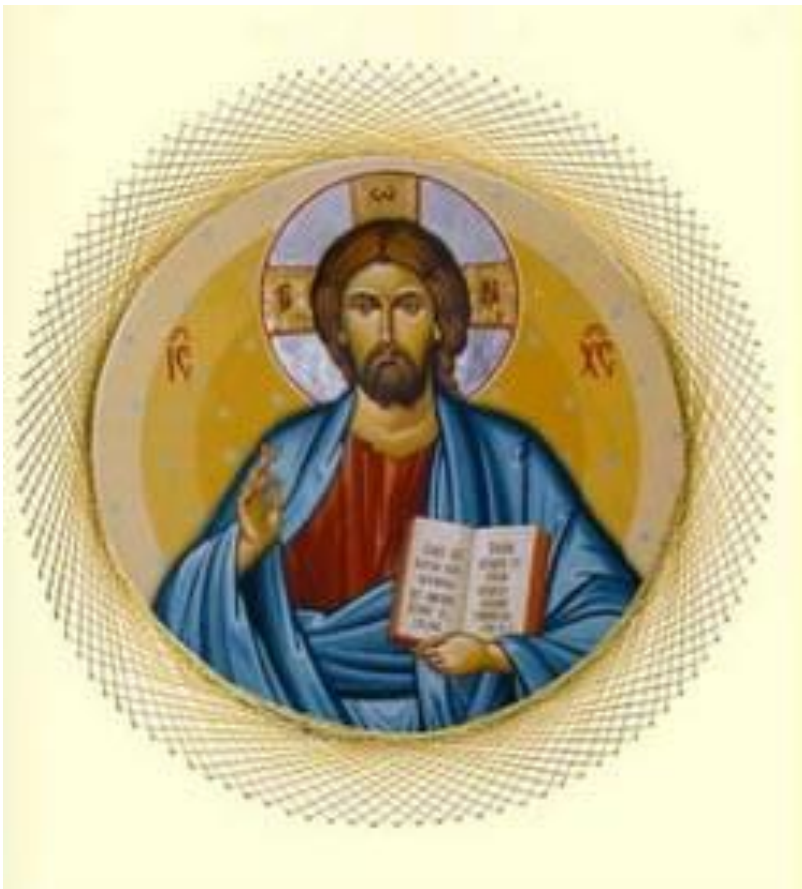
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The Nihil Obstat and Imprimatur declare that the
fourth volume of Son of God
(*Son of God: The Daily Gospel Year A-2*)
is free from moral and doctrinal error.



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Son of God:

The Daily Gospel A-2

(According to the Novus Ordo)

(Sundays A, Weekdays 2, Feast days)

Thoughts on the Daily Gospel

by

Father Edward J. Tyler

**Priest of the Diocese of Parramatta,
Australia**

John 20: 26-31

(Greek text, Latin Vulgate, English translation)

Καὶ μεθ' ἡμέρας ὀκτὼ πάλιν ἦσαν ἔσω οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ Θωμᾶς μετ' αὐτῶν.

Post dies octo iterum erant discipuli eius intus et Thomas cum eis.

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them.

ἔρχεται ὁ Ἰησοῦς τῶν θυρῶν κεκλεισμένων, καὶ ἔστη εἰς τὸ μέσον

Venit Iesus ianuis clausis et stetit in medio

Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them

καὶ εἶπεν, Εἰρήνη ὑμῖν.

et dixit pax vobis.

and he said, “Peace be with you!”

**εἶτα λέγει τῷ Θωμᾷ, Φέρε τὸν δάκτυλόν
σου ὧδε καὶ ἴδε τὰς χεῖράς μου,**

Deinde dicit Thomae infer digitum tuum huc
et vide manus meas

Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger
here; see my hands.”

**καὶ φέρε τὴν χεῖρά σου καὶ βάλε εἰς τὴν
πλευράν μου,**

et adfer manum tuam et mitte in latus meum

“Reach out your hand and put it into my
side.”

καὶ μὴ γίνου ἄπιστος ἀλλὰ πιστός.

et noli esse incredulus sed fidelis.

“Stop doubting but believe.”

ἀπεκρίθη Θωμᾶς καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ, Ὁ κύριός μου καὶ ὁ θεός μου.

Respondit Thomas et dixit ei Dominus meus et Deus meus.

Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”

λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς, Ὅτι ἐώρακάς με πεπίστευκας;

Dicit ei Iesus quia vidisti me credidisti.

Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed”

μακάριοι οἱ μὴ ἰδόντες καὶ πιστεύσαντες.

Beati qui non viderunt et crediderunt.

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Πολλὰ μὲν οὖν καὶ ἄλλα σημεῖα ἐποίησεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἐνώπιον τῶν μαθητῶν [αὐτοῦ],

Multa quidem et alia signa fecit Iesus in conspectu discipulorum suorum

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples,

ἃ οὐκ ἔστιν γεγραμμένα ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τούτῳ:

quae non sunt scripta in libro.

which are not recorded in this book.

**ταῦτα δὲ γέγραπται ἵνα πιστεύ[ς]ητε ὅτι
Ἰησοῦς ἐστὶν ὁ Χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ Θεοῦ,**

**Hoc haec autem scripta sunt ut credatis quia
Iesus est Christus Filius Dei**

**But these are written that you may believe
that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God,**

**καὶ ἵνα πιστεύοντες ζωὴν ἔχητε ἐν τῷ
ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ.**

et ut credentes vitam habeatis in nomine eius.

**and that by believing you may have life in his
name.**

Son of God: The Daily Gospel A-2



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Gospel: New International Version

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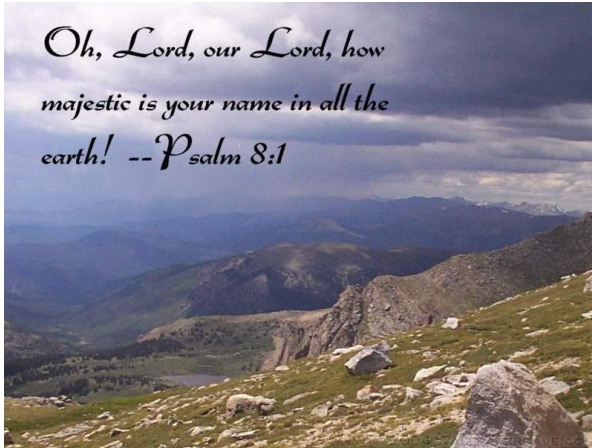
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Preface

The following work — written especially for the lay reader — is meant as an aid to reflection on the Gospel passage of each day of the liturgical year A-2 (Sundays: Cycle A, Weekdays: Cycle 2). At times the comment is exegetical, at times homiletic, at times more wide-ranging. It is hoped that these thoughts on the daily Gospel may assist in appreciating the living Person of Jesus Christ, Son of God and our brother, risen from the dead and Head of the Church which is his creation. He is the Son of God and the Lord and Redeemer of man.

Father Edward Tyler

*Oh, Lord, our Lord, how
majestic is your name in all the
earth! -- Psalm 8:1*



Praise to the Holiest in the height,

And in the depth be praise;

In all His words most wonderful,

Most sure in all His ways.

O loving wisdom of our God!

When all was sin and shame,

A second Adam to the fight

And to the rescue came.

O wisest love! that flesh and blood,

Which did in Adam fail,

Should strive afresh against the foe,

Should strive and should prevail.

And that a higher gift than grace

Should flesh and blood refine,

God's Presence and His very Self,

And Essence all divine.

O generous love! that He, who smote,

In Man for man the foe,
The double agony in Man
For man should undergo.

And in the garden secretly,

And on the Cross on high,
Should teach His brethren, and inspire
To suffer and to die.

Praise to the Holiest in the height,

And in the depth be praise;
In all His words most wonderful,
Most sure in all His ways.

(Saint John Henry Newman)

part of *The Dream of Gerontius* (1865).



This lyric “**Praise to the Holiest in the Height**” appears in St John Henry Newman’s long and moving poem, *The Dream of Gerontius*.

In 1865 the editor of *The Month* (an Illustrated Journal of Literature, Science and Art), asked Newman if he could contribute something, and Newman submitted *The Dream of Gerontius*. The lyric (“Praise to the Holiest”) appeared in hymnals not long thereafter. When William Gladstone (an Anglican), England’s “Grand Old Man,” lay dying in his home, he frequently quoted this hymn, finding in its noble sentiments a comforting solace in his last days. Canon Scott Holland, in preaching at Saint Paul’s Anglican Cathedral, pictured the dying prime minister as rehearsing over and over, day after day, “Newman’s hymn of austere and splendid adoration.”

Introduction

The Sunday Gospel passages of the Lectionary follow a three-year cycle (A, B, C), in the first year (A) of which the Gospel of Saint Matthew is generally read. This semi-continuous reading of Matthew during the Sundays of Ordinary Time (Year A) is interrupted by the reading of passages from the other Gospels (such as John) during the special liturgical seasons of Advent, Christmastide, Lent and Easter. Occasionally the Gospel of John is read also during the Sundays of Ordinary Time.

The weekday Gospel passages are so arranged that portions of all four Gospels are read each year. Mark is read first (First to Ninth Week), then Matthew (Tenth to Twenty-first Week), then Luke (Twenty-second to Thirty-fourth Week). Mark chapters 1-12 are read in their entirety, with the exception only of the two passages of Mark 6 that are read on weekdays in other seasons. From Matthew and Luke the readings comprise all the

matters not contained in Mark Christ's eschatological discourse as contained in Luke is read at the end of the liturgical year.

This continuous reading is often interrupted by the Gospels of solemnities and feast days, and of course during the special liturgical seasons. For instance, the Gospel of St John is read throughout Easter, and is used during the special liturgical seasons of Advent, Christmastide and Lent where appropriate.

The first reading and psalm of weekdays are arranged in a two-year cycle (1 and 2). In this book the first readings and psalms for Year 2 are cited in the Scripture references listed before the Gospel passage. The thoughts on the Gospels in this book are for Sundays Year A, and for the weekdays and feast days (and some special occasions) throughout the year.

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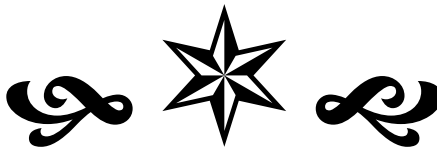
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The Season of Advent



First Sunday of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 25 (24):1-3 To you, I lift up my soul, O my God. In you, I have trusted; let me not be put to shame. Nor let my enemies exult over me; and let none who hope in you be put to shame.

Collect Grant your faithful, we pray, almighty God, the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ with righteous deeds at his coming, so that, gathered at his right hand, they may be worthy to possess the heavenly kingdom. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture readings: Isaiah 2:1 5; Psalm 122: 1 9;
Romans 13:11 14; Matthew 24:37 44

Jesus said to his disciples: “As it was in the days of Noah, so shall it also be when the Son of man comes. In the days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, right up till the day Noah

entered the ark. They did not know till the flood came and took them all away. So also will the coming of the Son of man be. Then two shall be in the field: one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill. One will be taken and one left. Watch therefore because you do not know at what hour your Lord will come. But know this that if the master of the house knew at what hour the thief would come, he would certainly watch and would not allow his house to be broken open. So you also be ready, because you do not know at what hour the Son of man will come.” (Matthew 24:37-44)

Particular Judgment Occasionally we read of intellectual prodigies who attain brilliant grades in their disciplines at an early age. I remember reading of an Australian mathematician who won great honours while still in his teens and who went on to gain a prestigious professorship when early into his adulthood. I know of another Australian who gained a professorship in philosophy in one of the renowned universities of the world while still young — a man whose philosophy was,

from a religious perspective, anything but satisfactory. However, whatever be the intellectual attainments of this or that person, no-one would consider intellectual brilliance as in any way *necessary*. If a person is of average intellect, so be it. That person may do well in life, and indeed very well — much better in certain respects (such as, say, in his marriage, or in general happiness) than the brilliant scholar, doctor, or professional. However, there is one aspect of human awareness and knowledge that is absolutely necessary for everyone, and it is reflected in ordinary civil law. If a person is charged with some crime, it is not generally to the point to ask if that person is brilliant or ordinary in personal intelligence. What *is* very much to the point is if it is asserted of that person that he did not know the difference between right and wrong. If it is demonstrated that a person does not know the difference between right and wrong — whatever be his intelligence in other respects — then that person is judged to be singularly deficient in the most important area of human awareness. He will be acquitted of personal responsibility for the

crime and committed to special care. As a human being he is seriously incapacitated, and dangerous — indeed, even more so if his intellectual ability in other respects is considerable. What I am saying is that the conscience of man is the most important feature of his intellectual capacity. If his conscience is sound and highly developed, his intellectual powers, whether moderate or great, will serve for good. Now, an obvious feature of his conscience is its sense of a *judgment* on him and on his actions.

That is to say, the person with a lively conscience has a lively sense of being judged on the goodness or evil of what he does — and consequently on his own goodness or evil. Granted the fallen character of man, generally a sound conscience will be a somewhat guilty one, though not entirely. But the point I am making is that my guilty conscience suggests to me that I am being judged now and will be judged in the future. In this sense, if I have a lively and sound conscience I shall be led to expect, however vaguely, a future judgment very particular to me. Cardinal Newman made a famous remark about this very personal

phenomenon in his classic *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk* (February, 1875). Conscience, he said, was “the aboriginal vicar of Christ” — by “aboriginal” he meant from the roots or origins of man’s nature. It had long been a dictum in English Protestant thought that nature is the voice of God. Butler states this in his master work, *The Analogy of Religion* (1736). Newman identifies that feature of the mind of man which represents most of all the voice of God, and in particular, the voice of Christ. It is the *conscience*. As the Second Vatican Council would teach, in his conscience, man “is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths.” As *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, “when he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking” (no.1777). The point here, though, is that we have a natural sense of a judgment — God’s judgment — on our actions. Now all this is confirmed by Christ in his teaching — reflected in today’s Gospel (Matthew 24:37-44) — but is made far more certain and explicit by that teaching. The parable of the poor man Lazarus, the words of Christ on the cross to the

good thief, and other New Testament texts as well speak of a final destiny of the soul, determined by the judgment of God on one's life and deeds. Each of us receives our eternal retribution at the moment of death in a particular judgment that refers our whole life to Jesus Christ. Following death, we each face God's judgment. This will result in the eternal bliss of heaven, either following a purification or immediately, or everlasting damnation. Let our conscience and Christ's teaching guide us!

There is a beautiful prayer that is commonly said following each decade of the Rosary. It is this: "O my Jesus, forgive us our sins. Save us from the fires of hell, and bring all souls to heaven, especially those most in need of thy mercy!" Repeatedly Christ refers to the judgment of God, indicating that he means us to keep it in mind throughout life. It is the greatest thing that we must face, and all that we think, say and do will come before its examination. The books will be opened and all will receive their just due. Let us not forget our particular judgment!

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*,
no.1020-1022: The particular judgment

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Second reflection: (Matthew 24:37-44)

Materialism The Old Testament looks forward to the coming of the Messiah. Christians know that he has come and has won Redemption for mankind. But we await his coming still, for he comes to us in a variety of ways still in the life of the Church. He will come to each of us at our death, and he will come finally to judge mankind at the end of the world. We should live as people who are ever prepared for this final coming, were it to occur at any moment. We shall be prepared for his final coming if we live in a way that welcomes him in all his other comings, especially in the graces and calls of every day. During Advent we begin the new liturgical year by welcoming Christ in whatever way he comes to us. But there are factors which prevent us from giving to Christ this welcome, and foremost is a lack of concern for him due to

a love for this world. Our Lord in the Gospel refers us to the Genesis story of Noah and those who died in the flood. Our Lord tells us that *“In the days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, right up till the day Noah entered the ark.”* What is wrong with *“eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage”*? Their sin was that they were totally unconcerned about God and his will. God created them to seek happiness in obedience to his will. *I am the Lord thy God*, he commands. Thou shalt not have anything in your life before me. Their interest was in this life alone, in *“eating, drinking and marrying”*. It was the ancient sin of materialism.

This ancient sin is ever new, and is especially alive in a secular world in which God is regarded as a purely private persuasion. In such a mindset, this world constitutes the true and only reality. The greatest need of the modern era is that there be a recapture of belief in God. As children of our era, we can likewise be touched by an overriding interest in the advantages deriving from this

world. Advent is the season when we renew our welcome for Christ in each and all of his comings — whether it be in those numerous moments of grace during life, or be it at our death, or be it when he finally comes at the end to judge the living and the dead. But if we are to welcome him, we must guard our hearts against materialism, the ever-encroaching love for this world alone.



Monday of the First week of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Jer 31:10; Is 35:4 Hear the word of the Lord, O nations; declare it to the distant lands: Behold, our Saviour will come; you need no longer fear.

Collect Keep us alert, we pray, O Lord our God, as we await the advent of Christ your Son, so that, when he comes and knocks, he may find us watchful in prayer and exultant in his praise. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 2: 1-5; Ps. 121; Matthew 8: 5-11

When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. Lord, he said, my servant lies at home paralysed and in terrible suffering. Jesus said to him, I will go and heal him. The centurion replied, Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,'

and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it. When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 8: 5-11)

The centurion’s faith We read later in this same Gospel of St Matthew that our Lord, in the midst of his intense ministry, came to his home town (Matthew 13:54-58) of Nazareth and taught in the synagogue. The people knew him very well — *“is not this the carpenter’s son?”* — but they refused to believe in him. He *“did not work many miracles there because of their unbelief”* (13:58). Many of the religious leaders (though not all) absolutely refused belief, and engineered his very death. Many of his own disciples refused to believe his word when he announced the doctrine of the Eucharist in Capernaum. This amazing doctrine was too much for them, even though it came directly from his lips. They abandoned their faith

in him such as it was, walked with him no more and returned to their homes (John 6: 66). They had been granted the grace of hearing and seeing the Lord, of being convinced, and of walking with him as his disciples. But his grace was forsaken. Most tragic and most spectacular of all was the defection of one of the very Twelve. Judas must have had faith in our Lord because Christ chose him from among his many disciples to be one of the Twelve. But he did not advance in faith — indeed, he secretly regressed to the point of scheming the betrayal. There are various instances given in the Gospels of our Lord berating the people for their lack of faith. He warned Capernaum that it was heading for hell. Of course, our Lord had ardent disciples who became the foundation of his Church, and who went on to live lives of heroic service of the Master. The point is that those of God's special choice, his chosen people, those among whom the Spirit of God assuredly moved and was drawing in the direction of faith in the Messiah and Son of God, could both succeed in faith and could fail in it miserably. Now, in our Gospel today

(Matthew 8:5-11) our Lord encounters one who is not of the children of Israel — a centurion. The fact that our Lord expresses astonishment at his faith and compares it with the faith of those of Israel, suggests that our centurion was not of the Faith, though a religious man and friendly to the chosen people. Let us then consider his faith and its implications.

His faith in Jesus was great — of this we are assured by our Lord's words. It far exceeded that of a very great number in Israel. He has profound respect for Jesus, regarding him as a very holy man and having great power before the throne of God. He declared himself unworthy to receive a visit from our Lord in his own home. Let us remember that we see our Lord repeatedly in the homes of people. Pharisees invited him to their homes for a meal or feast. Matthew, when called by our Lord arranged a feast in his home, to which he invited his colleagues the tax collectors. Martha, Mary and Lazarus had Jesus visiting them in their home. We read that Christ visited the towns and the "farms" of Galilee. He was received, then, into the

homes of farmers. But in our passage today the centurion, a man with power at his command, declares *himself unworthy* to have Jesus in his own home, for Jesus was so exalted a person. We are surely reminded of John the Baptist's statement that he was unworthy so much as to undo the sandals Jesus wore. Again, we think of Simon Peter's protestation following the miraculous catch of fish: *Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!* The centurion's self-abasement before the goodness of Jesus was great, which is to say that his faith in Jesus had a firm foundation in humility. Moreover, he was convinced that there was nothing Jesus could not do. All that was needed was for him to *say the word* — nothing more. We are reminded of the pagan official who visited the prophet Elisha to obtain a cure for his leprosy, and left the prophet, offended because all that the prophet did was direct him to wash in a local stream. He changed his mind and obeyed the prophet, but the centurion of today only asked for a simple word from our Lord. That would suffice. All this is to say that the Spirit of God works among the peoples. The

high faith of the centurion was but a beginning, of course, and it needed to accept much more of Jesus Christ to reach its full potential. But other instances can be given. The Samaritans — foreigners and heretics — mentioned in chapter 4 of the Gospel of St John declared themselves to have accepted that Jesus was *the Saviour of the world*.

Our Lord speaks of many outside the pale of the Faith coming from East and West to take their places at the table of the Kingdom. The Spirit of God is at work among the peoples, drawing them to a greater or lesser extent to the Saviour of the world, who is found in his body the Church. Within the Church is to be found the fullness of all Christ left for the redemption and sanctification of the world. But we ought to preserve in our hearts great respect for the striving and the positive achievements of the peoples. They are not alone. God their common Father has them in hand, and wishes all men to be saved. Let us respect and love all people with the mind of Christ.



Tuesday of the First week of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Zec 14: 5, 7 Behold, the Lord will come, and all his holy ones with him; and on that day there will be a great light.

Collect Look with favour, Lord God, on our petitions, and in our trials grant us your compassionate help, that, consoled by the presence of your Son, whose coming we now await, we may be tainted no longer by the corruption of former ways. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 11: 1-10; Ps. 71; Luke 10: 21-24

At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, "I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the learned and the clever, and revealed them to mere children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do. "All things have been entrusted to me by my Father. No one knows

who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” Then he turned to his disciples and said privately, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.” (Luke 10: 21-24)

The Fulfilment One of the very constant and widespread phenomena of religion is prophecy and the institution of prophets, broadly understood. Many scholars consider (what is called) “Shamanism” to be a feature of religion for millennia — the term itself is said to come from the Siberian term *saman*, meaning “an excited, moved or raised person.” They were, and are, not priests as such, but possessed of the authority coming from a direct experience of the deities and the unseen realm. Typically, the shaman enters into a trance and this state acts as a medium of communication between the supernatural and the everyday world. The shaman declares the utterance of the spirits. In Greek mythology, Delphi was the site of the

Delphic oracle, the most important oracle in the classical Greek world, and a major site for the worship of the god Apollo after he slew Python. Apollo spoke through his oracle, the priestess who was known as the Pythia. She sat on a tripod seat and there she, the priestess, or sibyl, would fall into a trance, allowing Apollo to possess her spirit. In this state, we may say, she was regarded as having “prophesied.” Her utterances were translated by the priests of the temple into ambiguous hexameters in response to questions put to the oracle. People consulted the oracle on everything from important matters of public policy (like war) to personal affairs. This great shrine lasted for many centuries. As just said, granted the assumptions of the shrine and those of the society or individuals being addressed, we have in action what we might call a form of “prophecy.” These examples, of course, are not meant to place those considered by various religions to be “prophets” on the same benchmark as the shaman or sibyl. They are cited simply to show how widespread is so-called “prophecy” in human history and religion. Another

example of the phenomenon would be Zoroaster (or Zarathustra) – generally thought to have been born in the eastern part of ancient Greater Iran, He was the founder and “prophet” of Zoroastrianism. When the Muslims invaded Persia and had contact with Zoroastrians they came to the conclusion that Zoroaster was a divinely-inspired “prophet”, and accorded the same treatment to his adherents as they did to other “people of the Book.” The Muslims, of course, had and have their own great “prophet” too. Mahomet is regarded by them as Allah’s messenger *par excellence*.

All up, the “prophet” is a common institution in the religions of man, and is ordinarily accorded respect by non-devotees, at least out of sensitivity for the adherents. Man wishes to know the mind of the gods, and makes it his business to ensure there is a way of doing so. In the case of the Hebrews, this natural yearning for a revelation was answered by the one true God. Certain persons, beginning with Abraham the father of the faith, declared what had been told them by God on his initiative. But now, there is

this notable feature in the prophetic tradition of Revealed Religion: it looked forward to a grand and surpassing communication that was to come. A Blessing was expected from the God who had called his people to be his own, a heavenly Blessing for the people and for “*all the families of the earth.*” It would be brought by and found in the Prophet, King and Anointed One — the Messiah. How they longed to see him! There was an expectation that grew over centuries, even spilling over to the talk and the imagination of other nations. There was One coming, an Oracle of the Most High who would fulfil, surpass and supersede all before him. This was yet another distinguishing feature of the religion of the Hebrews, marking it off from the likes of Delphi and other traditions and institutions of pagan “prophecy.” God was coming in his Messiah, and he was coming to save and to rule. By the time of our Lord, the place was rife with expectation. John the Baptist was asked if he were the One who was to come. He emphatically denied it, while saying that the One to come was already in their midst, and that he himself

was not worthy to undo his sandal-straps. One might have thought that the slightest creditable sign of the grand Event would have been received with enthusiasm, even with excessive credulity — but no. St John states that *the Word was made flesh, he came unto his own, and his own did not receive him*. The little ones did — and our Lord said that unless one becomes as a little child, one will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Thus are we brought to our Gospel today (Luke 10: 21-24). Our Lord “*full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, ‘I bless you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the learned and the clever, and revealed them to mere children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do’*”.

For well over a millennium, the expectation had been growing and now it was presented with its divine Fulfilment. “*Then he turned to his disciples and said privately, ‘Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but*

did not hear it.” Let us understand the treasure we possess. There is nothing more precious in the world than to possess and to be immersed in Jesus Christ by faith and baptism. Prophets and kings longed for this, and the world, without realizing it, has longed for it. Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of all and any “prophecy”. Let us belong to him, then, for he is *the Way, the Truth and the Life*, and the only way to the Father.



Wednesday of the First week in Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Hb 2:3; 1 Cor 4:5 The Lord will come and he will not delay. He will illumine what is hidden in darkness and reveal himself to all the nations.

Collect Prepare our hearts, we pray, O Lord our God, by your divine power, so that at the coming of Christ your Son we may be found worthy of the banquet of eternal life and merit to receive heavenly nourishment from his hands. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 25: 6-10a; Psalm 23:1-3a, 3b-6;
Matthew 15: 29-37

Jesus left there and went along the Sea of Galilee. Then he went up on a mountainside and sat down. Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the

lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel. Jesus called his disciples to him and said, I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way. His disciples answered, Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd? How many loaves do you have? Jesus asked. Seven, they replied, and a few small fish. He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, and when he had given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and they in turn to the people. They all ate and were satisfied. Afterwards the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. (Matthew 15: 29-37)

Christ our life In our Gospel passage today, our Lord mentions that the people “*have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat.*” Let us situate this in the sequence of events presented in this part of the Gospel. In chapter 14 he is in Galilee, departing “*to a desert place*

apart” after he heard of the death of John. There he fed a multitude with five loaves and two fish, after which his disciples gathered up twelve baskets of scraps. He and his disciples then went to Gennesaret (14:34), then on to the coasts of Tyre and Sidon (15: 21) where he healed the daughter of the Canaanite woman. Then he returned to a locality near the Sea of Galilee, which is the scene of our Gospel today. He taught the crowds, healed the sick, and once again fed a crowd with a handful of food. This time the crowd was of four thousand men, not counting women and children. He fed them with seven loaves and a few fish, gathering up seven baskets of scraps afterwards. Our Lord said that the crowds had been with him for “*three days*,” and had nothing to eat, and he could not just send them away in those circumstances. Following his return to Galilee from Tyre and Sidon, he had continued his consuming work, and the crowds would not depart and all provisions had run out. There were not just men there, but, it seems, whole families: “*women and children*” too (15: 38) and they had been with him for “*three days*.” Our

Lord's compassion is unflagging, and it is his second miracle of feeding the crowds with next to nothing. It is symbolic of many things. St John in his narration of the feeding of the multitude connects it with the holy Eucharist. It points to the living bread come down from heaven, which if a person eats of it, will never die. That living bread is the Person of Jesus Christ, given to us especially in the Eucharist. That Eucharistic allusion is not formally made by St Matthew in his account, though undoubtedly it would have occurred to very many of Matthew's readers. Our Gospel event today is yet another manifestation of the grand phenomenon of Jesus Christ. He is the One to whom the crowds of the world come. He is the One to whom they listen, and he is the One from whom they will depart satisfied.

The picture of the crowds, men, women and children, flocking to be with our Lord and to hear his words, reminds us of the true source of life for the human race and of its striving and activity. The foundation of the human being and of mankind is the moral life. If a man is not good, he

is a failure as a man. Whatever else we do and succeed in, if what we do fails in morality, we have failed in our humanity. But what is the basis of the good and moral life? Is it, say, obeying a rule of right conduct, a dictate of how to act — in a word, observance of a law? Is the moral law to which we must adhere if we are to be good and successful in our humanity, simply a law? Of course, the mind perceives a moral law to be obeyed and when it is obeyed, a good action is done and the one who does it advances in goodness. But *mere law* as such is not the ultimate foundation of morality and of the successful life. The ultimate foundation is not law but a *Person* — that Person being *God*, and God is incarnate in Jesus Christ. That is to say, Jesus Christ is the foundation of human morality, and the goal of the good life and indeed its source is union with Jesus Christ and sharing in his goodness. If at the core of our being, if in our hearts, we are like unto Jesus Christ, we shall to that extent be good. The moral law is that law, apprehended by man, which reflects the life and mind of God. It is founded on his nature. Inasmuch as

Christ is God incarnate, the moral law is that law which reflects the life and mind of Jesus Christ. As St Paul writes, *let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus* (Philippians 2:5), and as he writes elsewhere, now *not I, but Christ lives in me* (Galatians 2:20). This is the mystery now manifest, he declares, *Christ in you, your hope of glory* (Col 1:26-27). As we think of the crowds remaining with Jesus for those “*three days*” and having nothing else to live on but what came from him, let us think of this as a symbol of adherence to Christ as the life of man — which is to say, Christ as the heart and soul of human goodness. Man wishes instinctively to be good, and it is devastating to him to be told or to discover that he is bad. In fact, he naturally longs to be perfect. The path to this is union with Jesus Christ. Man must, like the crowds, come to Jesus and make Jesus his life.

Life is very complex, but in another sense it is very simple. Man was made to know, love and serve not a mere law, but a Person — the Person of God. That is to say, we were made to know, love and serve Jesus Christ with all

our mind, heart, soul and strength. If we do this properly and correctly, we shall attain great and heroic goodness. Our life will be successful to its core. Let us think of this as we think of the crowds gazing on Jesus, being sustained by him, and being sent away satisfied.



Thursday of the First week in Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 119 (118):151-152 You, O Lord, are close, and all your ways are truth. From of old I have known of your decrees, for you are eternal.

Collect Stir up your power, O Lord, and come to our help with mighty strength, that what our sins impede the grace of your mercy may hasten. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 26: 1-6; Psalm 118:1, 8-9, 19-21, 25-27a; Matthew 7: 21, 24-27

Jesus said, Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it

had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash. (Matthew 7: 21, 24-27)

Entry to the Kingdom Our passage today is taken from what has traditionally been called the Sermon on the Mount — that long compilation of our Lord's sayings and teachings which, lasting some 111 verses, follows and includes the Beatitudes at the beginning of chapter 5. The Sermon on the Mount in St Matthew, together with the Last Supper discourse in St John's Gospel, are the longest continuous statements of our Lord's teaching given in the Gospels. Our Lord, speaking on the Mount, gives wide ranging teaching which includes our quite fundamental passage today. It explains what is needed for entry into the kingdom of heaven — about which kingdom there is so much in St Matthew's Gospel. It is not enough, our Lord tells his listeners, to address or acclaim him as Lord. In

fact, he was being widely acclaimed at this juncture. Just before he began the Sermon on the Mount, we read that *“there followed him great multitudes of people from Galilee, and from Decapolis, and from Jerusalem, and from Judea and from beyond the Jordan”* (Matt 4: 25). After the Sermon was over, we read that *“when he came down from the mountain, great multitudes followed him”* (Matt 8:1). He had plenty of acclamation, but our Lord warned that more was needed for entry into God’s kingdom than this. They must do God’s will. This applied to those who were closest to him in other respects. On one occasion (Mark 3: 32-35), our Lord was teaching a circle of disciples before him and word came through the crowd that his mother and his brethren were awaiting him outside and wished to speak to him. *Who are my mother and my brethren?* he asked. *Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven, that person is my mother and my brother and my sister.* But of course all are sinners, and so there must be repentance. On another occasion he told the brief parable of the two sons (Matthew 21: 28-32). Their father

directed one of them to go to his vineyard and he said he would not. But afterwards he repented and went. He then went to the other, who said he would go, but in the event did not. Our Lord went on to tell the scribes and Pharisees that sinners were entering the kingdom before them because, in contrast with the scribes and Pharisees, they *repented* at the preaching of John the Baptist.

Repentance, then, is the first and foremost requirement of the will of God. God's will is that we be redeemed and sanctified. Redemption has been won for us, and sanctity is offered. But for this to begin, we must *repent and believe the Gospel*. For this reason St John the Baptist preached a baptism of *repentance* for the forgiveness of sins. Our Lord himself began his public ministry preaching *repentance* — for the kingdom of God was near. Repentance and obedient faith unlocks the door to the kingdom. Perhaps the most striking instance of this occurred during the last moments of our Lord's earthly life when he was hanging in agony from the cross, a veritable picture of degradation and disgrace. There, jeered at by the

leaders of the people, he was also jeered at by one of the criminals being crucified with him. If you are the Messiah-King, he bawled out, save yourself and us! Above the dying Jesus was the sign, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*. But now, we read that *“the other criminal rebuked him, saying, do you not fear God, seeing that you share in the same judgment? We are receiving the just reward of our deserts — but this man has done nothing wrong”* (Luke 23: 39-43). This was a magnificent admission, and clearly a spectacular fruit of the sacrifice of the divine Victim on the cross. The grace of Christ was flooding the soul of the repentant and humble criminal. His mind was being enlightened by divine grace — he could see clearly his own sins, he feared God, and he could see that the Man hanging next to him was absolutely holy. He had *repented*, had accepted as just the punishment he had received, and saw far more clearly the situation before him than so many of the crowd, including the leaders. He was granted the grace of a magnificent understanding. The Man at death’s door before him, rejected by the leaders, executed as a criminal,

blood-soaked and battered from scourging, beatings and the journey to the place of execution, was the King. *“Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.”* It is one of the amazing scenes of the Gospel. This sinner was now doing God’s will, and he was granted immediate entry into the Kingdom. *“Jesus said to him, truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”*

The goal of life is to enter the kingdom of God. This we do by entering into union with Jesus Christ — and we do this by *repenting* of our sins, *believing* in Jesus and his word, and resolving to follow the path of *obedience* in imitation of the Master. We must become disciples not just in word, but also in deed — not just saying Lord, Lord, but doing the will of God in union with Jesus Christ and by the power of his grace. In this way will our house be built on rock, and when difficulties come, perhaps especially at the very end, the house will stand for eternity.



Friday of the First week in Advent

Entrance Antiphon Behold, the Lord will come descending with splendour to visit his people with peace, and he will bestow on them eternal life.

Collect Stir up your power, we pray, O Lord, and come, that with you to protect us, we may find rescue from the pressing dangers of our sins, and with you to set us free, we may be found worthy of salvation. Who live and reign with God the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 29: 17-24; Psalm 147:1-6 ;
Matthew 9: 27-31

As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, calling out, Have mercy on us, Son of David! When he had gone indoors, the blind men came to him, and he asked them, Do you believe that I am able to do this? Yes, Lord, they replied. Then he touched their eyes and said, According to your faith will it be done to you; and their

sight was restored. Jesus warned them sternly, See that no one knows about this. But they went out and spread the news about him all over that region. (Matthew 9: 27-31)

The Mission It is interesting to notice how the Gospels end. In the Gospel of St John, the only explicit post-resurrection mention of the *Ascension* is that which occurred on the day of Christ's Resurrection. Jesus told Mary Magdalene not to hold on to him, for he was ascending to his Father (John 20: 17). It looks as if an "ascension" was occurring then, on that day. That evening Christ grants the Holy Spirit to the Apostles and commissions them with a share in his mission. The Gospel ends with the profession of the Messiahship and divinity of the risen Jesus by Thomas in chapter 20 and the primacy of Peter in chapter 21. St Mark ends his Gospel with a reference to the *Ascension* of the Lord and the disciples going everywhere to preach, with the Lord working with them (16: 19-20). The Gospel of St Luke ends with Christ's charge to the disciples that they preach everywhere, together with a brief reference to the

Ascension which was “*towards Bethany*” (24: 50-51), at “*the Mount of Olives, near Jerusalem*” (Acts 1: 12). Each of these Gospels explicitly refers to Christ’s giving to the disciples their mission. At the end of the Gospel of St Matthew there is *no* explicit reference at all to the Ascension. It is obviously assumed that the reader is aware of it — what eclipses everything is the final missionary charge imposed on the “*eleven disciples.*” Further, while Luke situates the final scene at the Mount of Olives near Bethany not far from Jerusalem, there is no reference at all to this scene in Matthew. After his Resurrection, our Lord — as had the angels before him (28: 7) — directs his disciples to go straight to Galilee. There they will see him (Matthew 28: 10). So “*the eleven went into Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had directed them to go*” (28: 16). While Luke’s final scene is the Mount of Olives near Jerusalem, Matthew’s final scene is the mountain in Galilee — and there “*they worshipped him, though some doubted*” (28: 17). Perhaps it was the mountain of the Transfiguration (Matt 17: 1) where he had been seen *in*

glory, and where the Father had directed that all *listen to him*. There Matthew's Gospel ends, with Christ declaring himself as possessing all authority in heaven and on earth, and sending his disciples out to the whole world to make disciples of all the nations. I mention all this to illustrate an emphasis that is there. The emphasis is missionary.

The point is that Christian discipleship means being missionary. So important is this that at the end of his Gospel — as has been said — Matthew leaves undescribed the Ascension of the Lord. What matters in his post-resurrection account is that Jesus is risen from the dead, that he is Lord of heaven and earth with universal authority, and that the Church of the Eleven has the mission from him of making of all the nations his disciples and members of his Church. However — and this is my second point about the missionary character of the Church, and of the disciple of Christ — this missionary impulse is not indiscriminate. It is subject to authority and guidance. This may be said to be symbolized in our Gospel event today (Matthew 9: 27-31). Our Lord is pursued by two

blind men — they “*followed him,*” while “*calling out*” their request. Our Lord obviously heard them, but let them continue. When he went indoors, they entered too and approached him. It was then (in the house and out of sight) that he asked them if they truly believed that he could do this for them. Yes, they said. At this he cured them — but “*warned them sternly, See that no one knows about this.*” Our Lord did not want them to tell anyone what he had done. But they went ahead and told everyone. Their action was not in accord with the will of God at that point. It went against the divine plan, despite the fact that, as a result, “*news about him*” spread “*all over that region.*” Speaking about Jesus and telling all of what he has done, is a work that is itself subject to Christ, and implicitly subject to his representative, the Church. We ought strive to know how God wishes us to fulfil our Christian mission in life. We ought ask for light from the Holy Spirit, and guidance from the Church. We read in the Acts of the Apostles how, during St Paul’s second missionary journey, Paul, Silas and Timothy “*were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the*

word in the province of Asia.” The same thing happened with Bithynia. At Troas, Paul had the vision beckoning him to Macedonia (Acts 16: 6-10). They were “*sure that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.*” St Luke’s mention of “*us*” indicates that Luke himself was with them.

The Christian is called to love Jesus Christ with all his heart and soul, but this love for Jesus includes being missionary on his behalf. Every day we ought strive to bear witness to him in ways that are appropriate and effective. However, we are not lone rangers in this all-important mission. It is not just a matter of what *I* wish to do for Jesus. In my efforts to serve Jesus Christ, I ought strive to know what God actually wants me to do in that respect. I must not be like our two blind friends of today’s Gospel who — blindly, we might say — went off and in fact did what our Lord told them not to do. Let us look to the Holy Spirit and the guidance of the Church, our Mother, and Christ’s representative, to give us the lead.



Saturday of the First week of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 80 (79): 4, 2 Come and show us your face, O Lord, who are seated upon the Cherubim, and we will be saved.

Collect O God, who sent your Only Begotten Son into this world to free the human race from its ancient enslavement, bestow on those who devoutly await him the grace of your compassion from on high, that we may attain the prize of true freedom. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 30: 19-21.23-26; Psalm 147:1-6;
Matthew 9: 35-10:1.6-8

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

Then he said to his disciples, The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. (Matthew 9: 35-10:1.6-8)

Zealous God There is a detail in our Gospel passage today that we ought notice and consider. The passage begins by telling us that “*Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.*” Jesus went through all (*pasas*) the towns and villages. We are not obliged by the wording of that sentence to think that *literally* all were visited by Jesus, for it is a form of speech — but clearly he did something approximating this. Perhaps he did visit literally *all*. The

“towns” (*poleis*) would have included larger centres that we would call “cities” and smaller ones that we would call “towns” and of course “villages.” Earlier in his Gospel, Matthew tells us that at the beginning of his public ministry *“Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching..and healing..”* (4: 23). He went through the whole of Galilee (*en holê tê Galilaia*). St Luke tells us the same thing in chapter 13: 22, that he went throughout the towns and villages. In chapter 9:6, he speaks of Jesus going *“throughout the villages.”* St Mark adds to the villages and towns, the farms (or crossroads) (Mark 6: 56). Moreover, he sends the Twelve ahead of him to do the same: *“He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, preach this message”*. The Twelve were to be his companions, and to go out as his envoys. We read elsewhere that this was not restricted to the Twelve. St Luke tells us that *“the Lord appointed seventy-two others, and sent them out in pairs before him to every city*

and place where he was to go” (10.1). What other prophet before him had done anything like this? John the Baptist, the greatest of the prophets before him, had remained in a few places and great numbers had come to him. Great numbers came to our Lord too, but he went out to all, seeking out those who were lost. As a result, it is quite possible that the majority of the population of Galilee and perhaps even Judea (and indeed beyond) had seen Jesus during his brief public ministry.

All this is to say that a distinguishing mark of the ministry and life of Jesus Christ was his missionary zeal. He was a prophet on mission. The Son of God had become man to save what was lost, and he went out to do it. He did not stay at home, as it were, awaiting the people to come to him. He did not go out into the wilderness, and allow his fame, his powers, his words and his compassion to attract the numbers who would have sought him. He went out to all, searching for them. He described himself as the Good Shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine in the wilderness and goes in search of the stray. Moreover, he said that heaven

rejoices more over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine virtuous who do not need to repent. That is to say, heaven is just as Jesus Christ showed himself to be. God is the opposite of what religions and much of philosophy have tended to portray him as being. Very many religions have thought of the highest god as withdrawn, once creation is brought about. The active forces, the powers that are more easily accessible, are the minor deities. The supreme being in very many religions is out of sight, out of reach, out of circulation, we might say. He is not interested. In philosophy it has often been the same. If ever anything looks beyond access, it is Aristotle's Pure Act, his First Cause. Perhaps this is as we ought expect, because the world itself appears, at least at first sight, to continue along according to its own devices. Many have the impression that the world is just there, that it always has been there, that it always will be there unless there is some cosmic mishap, and that a being called "God" is an irrelevant, unseen extra. Indeed, the world is all that there really is. If there is a God, he is certainly a long way

away. Now, all this can be corrected philosophically, but the greatest indicator of the real character of God is his own revelation granted over the centuries to his chosen people and finally in his own divine Son, born into this world as one of us. Christ goes after sinners, and seeks them all out. This he is portrayed as doing in our Gospel today (Matthew 9: 35-10:1.6-8), and it is this which he is doing in the lives of all.

Let us open ourselves to the loving compassion of God our Father and Jesus Christ his Son, our Redeemer. There is a famous poem by Francis Thompson, first published in Thompson's first volume of poems in 1893. It is called the ***Hound of Heaven***. The hound is God. As the hound follows the hare, never ceasing in its running, ever drawing nearer in the chase, with unhurrying and unperturbed pace, so does God follow the fleeing soul by His Divine grace. Though it is in sin or in human love, and seeks to hide itself away from God, Divine grace follows after. Grace follows unwearingly ever after, till the soul feels its

pressure forcing it to turn to Him. Let us surrender to the pursuit of the Hound, for therein lies our peace.



Second Sunday of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Is 30: 19, 30 O people of Sion, behold, the Lord will come to save the nations, and the Lord will make the glory of his voice heard in the joy of your heart.

Collect Almighty and merciful God, may no earthly undertaking hinder those who set out in haste to meet your Son, but may our learning of heavenly wisdom gain us admittance to his company. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 11:1-10; Ps 72:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17;
Romans 15:4-9; Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the desert of Judea, saying: Do penance: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this was he who was spoken of by Isaiah the prophet, saying: A voice of one crying in the desert, Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths. And the same John wore a garment of camels' hair

and a leathern girdle about his loins. His food was locusts and wild honey. Then there went out to him Jerusalem and all Judea, and all the country about Jordan. They were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins. And seeing many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them: brood of vipers, who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruit worthy of penance. And think not within yourselves, We have Abraham for our father. For I tell you that God is able of these stones to raise up children to Abraham. For now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not yield good fruit, shall be cut down, and cast into the fire. I indeed baptize you in the water for penance, but he that shall come after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear. He will baptize you in the Holy Ghost and fire. His fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly cleanse his floor and gather his wheat into the barn; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

(Matthew 3:1-12)

Repentance One of the things which distinguishes the life of a true Christian is his *long range* view of things. What do I mean? Years ago the Australian ABC TV *Compass* programme featured an interview with the Australian author Donald Horne, the author of the well-known book *The Lucky Country*. Donald Horne was then 80 years of age, and even though by any standards he would not have too long to go in life (he died only a few years later), he declared himself to be an atheist. The interviewer, Geraldine Doogue asked him, then, what he expected to happen after this life was over. He said that his practice had always been not to look too far ahead, but to deal with things in the immediate future. So he chose not to think of the Afterlife. An observer could not help questioning the wisdom of such a policy, for there are plenty of things well into the future which people naturally prepare for. They prepare for their careers, their retirement, their children's education and careers, and so forth. People even prepare for their very death, with life insurance, their burial plot, and who the undertaker might

be. It is surely wise then to consider what will happen immediately *after* death. It is for good reason that the Christian thinks not just of the things in the immediate future, but of the last things, the very final things which he will have to face. And what is the final thing? It is the coming of the Lord to judge. The Lord will come again to judge the living and the dead. The last things are death which can come at any moment, and with death Christ comes to judge. The result of this judgment will be either heaven or hell. For those who are saved, there will probably be some purification in purgatory, but they are saved. Similarly, at the end of time the last thing will be the coming of Christ to judge, and that judgement will be final, and will affect all mankind. It is scarcely prudent to have a policy of avoiding all thought of the more distant future, and to confine our plans to what is immediately ahead. Apart from anything, death itself could come immediately. What is to happen after that? Indeed, there is this paradox that while we know the last things that are to

come, we are not really certain of the more immediate things ahead.

All our life we live awaiting the coming of the Lord, whether it be his coming to us individually, or his final coming to all at the end of time. This we know on the word of Christ. Advent is the time to renew this awareness. Christ comes to bring a final and eternal salvation. But of course, as with the coming of anyone important, there is also a certain apprehension. Will I make a good impression when he comes? When it is a question of the coming of the Lord, there is this consideration too, that every day of our lives, indeed every moment, is open to the gaze of the Lord. He knows us far better than we do ourselves. Every day and every moment we are creating the impression we shall make. So it is that Christ's coming has implications for our daily lives. What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for him? And what will I do for him from now on? We are reminded of this by our Gospel today (Matthew 3: 1-12), for in it St John the Baptist tells the people that their present moral

condition was not acceptable to God. They had to repent. They had to change their whole mind — and that is where our great struggle lies, within our mind and heart. We are called to be religious and servants of God above all in our minds and hearts. As St Paul writes, *let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*. We are to wait for the coming of Jesus by reforming ourselves to the very core of our minds and hearts, modelling ourselves on the mind and heart of Jesus. Indeed, this is what devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus means. The reform of ourselves is a demanding and gradual process of having our minds and hearts become like that of Christ — indeed sharing in the life of Christ by grace. The Holy Spirit transforms the Christian into another Christ, if the Christian cooperates. *Not I, but Christ lives in me*, St Paul writes. But the first step in this long and redeeming process is that we must repent. We do not repent “first” in the sense that once we repent for the first time, all further repentance is unnecessary. We must first repent in the sense that the whole Christian life depends on our repentance. It is the foundation that itself

must ever be renewed. We must be always repenting, every day of our lives, for the struggle against sin is a daily one.

Repentance means a recognition of our sins and our sinfulness. It means telling Christ we are sorry, and having the firm intention to amend. It means making up for our sins. It means casting our lot again and again all through life with Christ, and resolving to follow in his footsteps. All this we do and should do repeatedly in the Sacrament of Repentance and Reconciliation. Let us make this Sacrament a regular part of our lives, accompanied by daily personal acts of repentance, especially during Advent, as a new start in our daily quest for holiness.



Monday of the Second week of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Jer 31:10; Is 35:4 Hear the word of the Lord, O nations; declare it to the distant lands: Behold, our Saviour will come; you need no longer fear.

Collect May our prayer of petition rise before you, we pray, O Lord, that, with purity unblemished, we, your servants, may come, as we desire, to celebrate the great mystery of the Incarnation of your Only Begotten Son. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 85:9ab, 10-14;

Luke 5:17-26

One day as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law, who had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem, were sitting there. And the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick. Some men came carrying a paralytic on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. When they

could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus. When Jesus saw their faith, he said, Friend, your sins are forgiven. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone? Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. . . . He said to the paralysed man, I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home. Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, We have seen remarkable things today. (Luke 5: 17-26)

Forgiving sins It is often said that a sense of wonder is important for philosophy — but it is also important for

religion. There are many absolutely remarkable things which our Lord said, which are recorded in the Gospels and which we tend simply to take for granted. On one Sabbath our Lord and his disciples were walking through the cornfields, and the disciples began to pick ears of corn to eat. They were seen by the Pharisees, and the matter was immediately taken up as a violation of the Sabbath. The striking thing about the ensuing exchange was our Lord's statement that "*the Son of Man is Lord (kurios) even of the Sabbath*" (Mark 2: 28). The Sabbath was one of the most sacred, distinctive and fundamental institutions of Judaism — and our Lord here calmly asserted that he was "lord" even of that. No prophet, king or priest in the history of the nation had made such a claim. In St John's Gospel there are many extraordinary statements: "*I and the Father are one,*" and "*he who sees me sees the Father.*" Our passage today is taken from St Luke, and it contains another striking act of Jesus Christ. When we situate the religion of the Old Testament in the context of the religions of the peoples, one of its striking notes is its consciousness

of sin. It endeavoured to have sin forgiven. In the Book of Leviticus, for instance, the ritual for the forgiveness of sin is referred to. When the fat is removed from the peace offering, *“the priest shall burn it on the altar for an odour pleasing to the Lord. Thus the priest shall make atonement for him, and he will be forgiven”* (Lev. 4: 31). But of course, the priest himself did not take away sins in this ritual. Indeed, sins were not absolutely *“taken away”* by the ritual either, although the mercy of God was expected. After all, we read in the great prophecy of Jeremiah that in the new and future Covenant, God says that *“I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more”* (Jeremiah 31:34). In the religion of the Old Testament, the children of Israel appealed to the mercy of God for forgiveness of sin, and trusted that in his mercy he forgave. But no individual presumed to have the personal authority to forgive sins.

That this was in fact the case, and not simply because we cannot find an instance of it in the books of the Old Testament, is indicated by the immediate reaction of the

scribes and Pharisees to our Lord's action. "*Who is this man who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?*" To forgive sins was to take God's place, and that was a blasphemy. When he stood before the Sanhedrin and answered the question of Caiaphas asking whether he was the Christ the Son of God, Jesus stated that he was, and that they would see him *coming on the clouds of heaven, seated at the right hand of the Power* (Mark 14: 62). At this the high priest accused him of blasphemy, and the council declared him worthy of death. He was making himself equal to God. Here in our Gospel passage today (Luke 5: 17-26), the scribes and Pharisees show the intimate and exclusive connection in the religion of Israel between the power to forgive sins and God himself. No priest or prophet or king on his own authority forgave sins. At most, the priest signalled the hope that in his mercy God had forgiven on the basis of the sin-offering having been made. To have arrogated to oneself the power to forgive sins would have been in effect to have placed oneself in God's position — it was a blasphemy. But here our Lord

does precisely this, and does so calmly, in full view of the people, and in full view of the leaders of the people, knowing exactly what those leaders were accusing him of in their hearts. Our Lord does not say to the paralytic, I see that you have faith in God, so I can tell you that God in his mercy would have certainly forgiven you your sins — a wonderful statement for a sinner to hear, and doubtlessly one he would trust as coming from a great and holy prophet. But no. In this case the prophet in question means that *he himself* is forgiving the sins of the paralytic, and that this is so is evident from the immediate reaction of the Pharisees. Our Lord does not explain away his action in the face of a misunderstanding. No. The Pharisees had seen and had understood the situation correctly, and our Lord proceeds to prove that he has this authority by healing the paralytic.

I said at the beginning that we really do need to have a sense of wonder in religion. The great Object of wonder in the Christian religion is the Person of Jesus Christ and his Revelation. Here he, the Son of Man, reveals more of his

ineffable, divine Person. He has the power to forgive the sins of man. Indeed that is his great mission, as the Angel declared to Joseph, his holy foster-father — that he would “*save his people from their sins*” (Matt 1: 21), and as John the Baptist said of him, “*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*” (John 1: 29). This wondrous power of forgiving sins is entrusted by Jesus to his Church, and administered especially, though not exclusively, in the Sacrament of Penance. Let us appreciate it, then!



Tuesday of the Second week in Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Zec 14: 5, 7 Behold, the Lord will come, and all his holy ones with him; and on that day there will be a great light.

Collect O God, who have shown forth your salvation to all the ends of the earth, grant, we pray, that we may look forward in joy to the glorious Nativity of Christ. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 40:1-11; Psalm 96:1-3 and 10-13;
Matthew 18:12-14

Jesus said to his disciples, What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety nine that did not wander off. In the same

way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost. (Matthew 18: 12-14)

Lost and saved One of the most well-known features of the ministry and teaching of Jesus Christ is his use of parables. He takes an ordinary event of everyday life and points out a likeness between that visible event and something in the unseen world of God and his ways. We cannot see what God is like because he is not visible, but Christ points to something we do see and tells us that in a certain respect it is like the God whom we cannot see. Christ develops a parallel between the shepherd seeking the straying sheep, and the unseen God loving and pursuing the one who is morally astray. The “shepherd” is a kind of analogy. This is a very common form of teaching, of illustration and of communication. Someone has no experience of what it is we are telling him about, so we draw on something he is familiar with and say that it is like what we have been speaking of. We make use of an analogy. Analogy has often been used in defending the Christian religion against unbelief. For instance, the

eighteenth-century Anglican Bishop Joseph Butler wrote a famous work in the philosophy of religion, *The Analogy of Religion*. In it he defends the divine authorship of the Christian religion. He sees numerous analogies or resemblances between the course of the world and the course of the divine plan of redemption. It suggests a common divine origin. Now, my purpose in mentioning this is just to introduce the idea that patterns in this world may suggest patterns in the next. For instance, one of the most striking things about the world is life. Life abounds; it is luxurious, beautiful and glorious. It is a beautiful world, very largely because it is a living world. We gain a sense of this in the numerous nature documentary movies that enjoy undying popularity. From the tiniest living thing at the foot of the ocean to the thundering hordes of animals in the plains, life dances its dance and arouses the wonder of all. But living things die. They can be lost, destroyed, beaten, stamped to the dust. Every living thing can be attacked or overtaken by an enemy, and in any case, at the last, will wither and die. Things that live are lost, and pass

away. Does this visible pattern forebode a similar pattern beyond this visible scene?

Of course, very many people never would ask such a question. Such patterns are just brute facts. Beautiful people and lovely living things come and go. Every day people are snatched from life. They go missing. They get sick and die. That is just part of life and that is the end of it. Life moves on and there is nothing more to be considered in terms of an unseen world beyond. Anyhow, there is no unseen world. Any talk of a pattern here in this life being illustrative of a pattern beyond this life is unnecessary, unwarranted, and boring anyway. But that view of things is very superficial, and as mentioned earlier, our Lord was forever drawing analogies between what we see in our ordinary life and what happens for eternity. There is indeed much in this life that is indicative of patterns in the next. In Christ's parable today, the shepherd is illustrative of God. He is like God — in a certain sense he constitutes an analogy of the character of the Creator. The Creator is not what we might otherwise

imagine, for we never actually see nor hear him for ourselves. We might easily think that he is absent and quite unconcerned for our plight and for the plight of those who in any sense stray from a secure situation. But no. *“If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety nine that did not wander off”* (Matthew 18: 12-14). God is immensely concerned for each of us, and doubly so — as it were — if we stray from the path of moral goodness. He seeks us out, as if we are more important to him than the ninety-nine who have not strayed at all. *“In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.”* These words of Christ suggest to us his agony at seeing the defection of Judas going on before his very eyes. We must assume that he did countless things discretely in order to win back the heart of the one he had chosen. But Judas would not. Real life shows countless instances of

individuals being lost, and it shows numerous instances of others making tremendous efforts to reclaim and save them. All this is revelatory of the unseen.

There are plenty of things in life to suggest the grand lessons of today's Gospel. We can stray and be lost. It can result in death. This pattern can be regarded as being like what can happen to us in a far deeper and more serious sense, a sense unseen by the physical eye. We can lose our souls forever. Just as in real life people can and do abandon all to help those in danger and need, so God is like the good shepherd who leaves all to seek out the one who is lost. Christ was sent to seek and save those who were lost, and his own particular mission was to save the lost sheep of the House of Israel. Let us abandon ourselves in trust to our Good Shepherd, who saves us from ourselves, and from all that can do us harm.



Wednesday of the Second week of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Hb 2:3; 1 Cor 4:5 The Lord will come and he will not delay. He will illumine what is hidden in darkness and reveal himself to all the nations.

Collect Almighty God, who command us to prepare the way for Christ the Lord, grant in your kindness, we pray, that no infirmity may weary us as we long for the comforting presence of our heavenly physician. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 40: 25-31; Psalm 102;

Matthew 11:28-30

Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

Happiness As I write this, David Lungtok is an Australian Buddhist monk practising in the Tibetan tradition. Born and raised in Melbourne, he graduated from Monash University Law School in 1978, after which he travelled extensively throughout Asia and India. During this time he became enamoured of Eastern philosophy and meditation, an interest which led him to explore more deeply the teachings of Buddha. He became a Buddhist monk in Nepal in 1981 and lived and studied at Nalanda Monastery in France before returning to India in 1986. There he taught Buddhist philosophy and meditation for many years in Dharamsala, Katmandu, New Delhi and Bodhgaya. He completed a three-year appointment as Director of Thubten Shedrup Ling Monastery near Bendigo in Central Victoria. Following this, he resided in Sydney pursuing his practice of meditation. Presumably he knows what he is talking about in matters of Buddhist practice. “Buddhists say everything comes from the mind,” he is reported to have stated, “If we train our mind properly, happiness will be the result.” It seems that Buddha himself

said this: “We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world.” David Lungtok describes meditation as “a method to make the mind relaxed and peaceful. Tranquillity gives rise to clarity from which understanding and wisdom grow.” This wisdom, explains Lungtok, allows us to observe that negative emotions such as anger and desire cause all of our problems. However, by applying antidotes, it is possible to free ourselves from their harmful influence. So, to overcome anger, Buddhists cultivate the practice of patience. To counteract desire — let us say for wealth or status — one reflects upon the impermanent and transitory nature of life. Similarly, positive behaviours such as acting in a kind and loving way, or as Buddhists say, practising ‘loving-kindness’, give rise to joyful experiences and we should therefore cultivate them. From what I know of Buddha, Lungtok seems to be a reliable disciple and transmitter of the creed. The search for personal happiness drives the quest; desires are at the root of the problem; meditation is a principal instrument; the solution comes

with radical detachment; Enlightenment is the goal. Now, in all this, obviously, there is no ultimate personal *Thou*.

The great French Catholic theologian Henri de Lubac (1896-1991) gave extensive consideration to Buddhism, publishing at least three major studies on the subject. What, we may ask, had de Lubac to say? He said much, of course, but let us take a summary statement by a friend of his, a fellow-giant in modern theology, Hans Urs von Balthasar. In *The Theology of Henri de Lubac* (Ignatius Press 1991), von Balthasar summarizes some of de Lubac's insights on Buddhism: There is, he writes, no "true Thou who could be loved as such," and so "Buddhistic love remains ultimately without an object love remains a preliminary stage because ultimately there is no opposition of persons." "All the insufficiency — all the falsity — of the Buddhist religion stems primarily from this." What, then, is at stake is the human person which is sacrificed for the ideal of happiness. The problem, in Balthasar's words, is that in Buddhism "the human person . . . is dissolved in the unreality of an idealistic monism." As summarized by

Balthasar, for de Lubac “only the self-revealing God guarantees the eternal worth of the human person.” Christianity offers the fulfilment of the person through the adoration of God. In his book, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (1994), Pope St. John Paul II, himself a friend of de Lubac whom he raised to the cardinalate, says this of Buddhism: “The enlightenment experienced by Buddha comes down to the conviction that the world is bad necessitating a break with the ties that join us to external reality”. Liberation from evil comes from detachment from and indifference to the world which is bad — critically, this liberation does not come from union with God. Buddhism is born of an awareness of the evil in man’s attachment to the world, while the Christian religion is born of the *revelation of the living God*. Now, I mention all this to bring us to our Gospel passage today, in which our Lord tells us very clearly wherein lies true happiness. It does involve, of course, detachment from the world, but in order to come to him who is to be the living Object of our heart and our life. “*Come to me, all you who are weary*

and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11: 28-30).
Therein lies the happiness of man.

There are numerous answers to the fundamental question of the happiness of man, and Buddhism is one of the most noteworthy. It is Buddhism’s outstanding achievement to have identified attachments to the world as a source of human unhappiness and to have proposed techniques of cultivating detachment. Other answers have been given, but all these pale before the grand revelation of God who has intervened to declare his answer to man’s questions. The answer is to listen to his divine Son: “*This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him*” was God’s revelation on the high mountain (Luke 9: 35). Christ is *the Way, the Truth and the Life*. In him we find our rest.



Thursday of the Second Week of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 119 (118): 151-152 You, O Lord, are close, and all your ways are truth. From of old I have known of your decrees, for you are eternal.

Collect Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the paths of your Only Begotten Son, that through his coming, we may be found worthy to serve you with minds made pure. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 41: 13-20; Psalm 145:1, 9-13ab;
Matthew 11: 11-15

Jesus said, I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. For all the Prophets and

the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. He who has ears, let him hear. (Matthew 11: 11-15)

Christ our Light There are two cases in the Old Testament in which some form of ascension into heaven is mentioned. The first is the case of Enoch the father of Methuselah, who “*walked with God, and he was no longer here, for God took him*” (Genesis 5: 24). The statement that “*God took him*” pictures Enoch being taken alive to God’s abode. But of course, the question immediately arises as to what this inspired picture is really meant to signify. There are many other sentences in this early part of the book of Genesis which invite such a question, including Enoch’s very age of more than 400 years. The other case of an ascension is that of the prophet Elijah. His prophetic career is described over several chapters and concludes in 2 Kings 2 with a single sentence describing how he departed the scene of life. He “*went up to heaven in a whirlwind*” (2 Kings 2: 11). The meaning of this inspired depiction of Elijah’s departure is open for reverent

discussion. The final mention of Elijah is in the Book of Malachi, which predicts that *“I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord”* (Mal 3:23). Now, our question could be, what did and does the devout believer make of all this? There were a variety of interpretations and so it was in respect to the interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures in general. For instance, that it was widely expected that the same Elijah of centuries before would appear again in the flesh is clear in the Gospels. The priests asked John the Baptist if he were Elijah, and it was widely rumoured that our Lord was Elijah or one of the ancient prophets come back to life. When our Lord was dying on the Cross, the people said, *“Let us see whether Elijah comes to his rescue”* (Matt 27:40). The Old Testament — the Hebrew Scriptures — are inspired by God, but the problem always was their interpretation. For instance, what was to be made of and expected of the Messiah himself? Jesus Christ came from heaven to dispel the plethora of interpretations and to bring in his own Person the definitive one. The Scriptures in

their broad outline are interpreted by the words and Person of Christ.

So it is that, for instance, “the coming of Elijah” too is illuminated by the Person and words of Jesus Christ. John the Baptist was Elijah come again. It is he who fulfilled the prophecy and prepared the people for the Day of the Lord which was the coming of Jesus Christ. We read in the Gospel of St Luke that the Angel Gabriel told Zechariah of his son that “*God himself will go before him, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to prepare for the Lord a people well-disposed*” (Luke 1: 17). In the Gospel of St Matthew, John the Baptist predicts the day of judgment using imagery similar to that of Malachi. He preached that the Messiah was coming, and actually identified him. Further, his prophetic ministry was conducted in a style that immediately recalled the image of Elijah to his audience. He wore a coat of animal hair secured with a leather belt. He typically preached in wilderness areas. As mentioned earlier, the chief priests send a delegation to ask him if he was Elijah, to which, he

replied that “*I am not*” (John 1:21). In our Gospel passage today, our Lord states clearly that “*if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come*” (Matthew 11: 11-15). That is to say, the great Day of the Lord has begun with the coming of Jesus Christ, and John was its great herald — a greater than he had not been seen. He was a worthy messenger of the predicted Kingdom. “*Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John.*” On the occasion of the Transfiguration, Elijah appeared with Moses conversing with Jesus. As Jesus and his disciples were coming down from the Mountain after it, his disciples asked him about the teaching of the scribes that Elijah must first come. Our Lord replied that, yes, but he had already come. They then understood that he was referring to John the Baptist (Matthew 17:12).

The point is that Jesus Christ is the light beaming across the inspired Scriptures, lighting up their meaning and enabling us to know and love what God has revealed. *I am the Light of the world*, he said. After he rose from the dead he walked with two of his disciples to Emmaus, explaining the Scriptures and interpreting them in the light of his own Person, his Passion, Death and Resurrection. That very evening he appeared to the Eleven, reminding them of what he had said while with them, that “*everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and psalms had to be fulfilled. Then he opened their minds to the understanding of the Scriptures.*” Without Jesus Christ, the Scriptures will not be properly understood. Let us renew once again our conviction that in every way, Jesus Christ is *the Light of the world*.



Friday of the Second Week of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Behold, the Lord will come descending with splendour to visit his people with peace, and he will bestow on them eternal life.

Collect Grant that your people, we pray, almighty God, may be ever watchful for the coming of your Only Begotten Son, that, as the author of our salvation himself has taught us, we may hasten, alert and with lighted lamps, to meet him when he comes. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 48:17-19; Psalm 1:1-4 and 6;
Matthew 11:16-19

Jesus said, To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the market places and calling out to others: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say,

‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ But wisdom is proved right by her actions. (Matthew 11: 16-19)

Our choice One of the intriguing features — to say the least — of Christ’s almost three years with the Twelve is his relationship with the one who would betray him. The Gospel of St John shows that certain of our Lord’s disciples (Andrew, Simon, John, Philip, Bartholomew) attached themselves to him even before his ministry had begun in a public sense. They came to know he was the Messiah soon after his baptism (John 1: 40-51). At least some of these accompanied him on his return to Galilee and were present at the wedding feast of Cana when he changed the water into wine. Other disciples came into contact with our Lord later. We know the names of a few disciples, outside the circle of the Twelve, who had been with our Lord from early in his public ministry. Justus and Matthias were two such, and Matthias became a member of the Twelve after the Ascension, as the replacement of

Judas (Acts 1: 21-26). Another disciple was Cleopas, one of the two with whom our Lord walked to Emmaus on the day of his Resurrection. Some disciples persevered in their discipleship (such as those three), others did not. Among those who were not faithful were those who left our Lord at his public declaration of the doctrine of the Eucharist at Capernaum (John 6: 66). New disciples joined him too. Bar-Timaeus may have been one, because we are told that he “*followed our Lord along the road*” after the cure of his blindness. The chief tax collector, Zacchaeus, became a true disciple — for our Lord said that “*salvation*” had come to him. It seems that our Lord even gained a disciple while carrying his cross to Calvary — I refer to Simon of Cyrene. His two sons Alexander and Rufus were known in the later Christian community (Mark 15: 21). Now, at a certain point in his public ministry, our Lord gathered his disciples and called the *Twelve*, whom he called “*Apostles*” — envoys, ambassadors (Luke 6: 14-16). They were to be envoys of the King. Among them, mysteriously, was Judas who would betray him. St John tells us that Jesus “*knew*

what was in man” (John 2: 24-25). So he knew what was in each of his Apostles, and we must therefore conclude that Judas not only had a true vocation (of course), but plenty of promise. He was selected ahead of many other disciples, such as Matthias, Justus and Cleopas.

We read that our Lord sent these Twelve out on mission ahead of him to preach and to work miracles — and this they did, reporting to him on their return. Judas would have experienced the power of Jesus’ name in what he did on mission. But our Lord would have seen, and with tremendous concern, a change going on in the heart of his chosen friend — and chosen “*friend*” he was. Our Lord addressed Judas as “*friend*” in the Garden of Gethsemane when he arrived for the betrayal (Matthew 26: 50). So serious was the change in Judas’ heart that at the end of our Lord’s discourse at Capernaum announcing the doctrine of the Eucharist, our Lord told the Twelve that though he had chosen them, one of them was “*a devil*” (John 6: 70). St John tells us that our Lord was speaking specifically of Judas. Perhaps our Lord’s awesome, though oblique,

statement was meant as a solemn warning to Judas of the terrible course his heart was taking. However, our Lord did not expel his “*friend*” from his company, even though he, Jesus, was capable of dramatically blunt words and actions. For instance, he unhesitatingly and sharply rebuked the leaders of the people, and he physically expelled the sellers and money changers from the Temple. We do not read of this vigorous and open action in respect to Judas. Even at the very last, just a couple of hours before the betrayal itself, our Lord does not haul Judas to book in front of them all. He warns of the betrayal in general terms, and warns Judas himself briefly but privately (Matthew 26: 25). It is obvious that our Lord at no point had brought Judas’ false position to light, because the disciples could not guess who the betrayer was when mention of a betrayal was made at the Last Supper. What, then, was our Lord doing? We may presume that our Lord was doing all that he could, and all that was best. Discretely, silently, our Lord was working on the heart of his “*friend*,” taking the best and most effective course for a

change of heart. Our Lord would have left no stone unturned to bring about in Judas the change that was so necessary for his very salvation. But all to no avail. We are reminded of God's words to his people in Isaiah: "*What more could I have done that I have not done?*" (Isaiah 5: 4).

I have dwelt on the case of Judas, and our Lord's doubtless constant efforts for him, as an example of the point in our Gospel passage today (Matthew 11: 16-19). John came doing one thing and to no avail. The Son of man came doing another, and to no avail. God is the Good Shepherd ever pursuing the stray. But man has been granted the gift of free choice, and has it in his power to refuse the living God himself — to his peril. There is nothing God has not done, nor would not do, to save us from damnation. Let us appreciate our power to choose him, and let us make that choice. All for Jesus, then!



Saturday of the Second Week of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 80 (79):4, 2 Come and show us your face, O Lord, who are seated upon the Cherubim, and we will be saved.

Collect May the splendour of your glory dawn in our hearts, we pray, almighty God, that all shadows of the night may be scattered and we may be shown to be children of light by the advent of your Only Begotten Son. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ecclesiasticus 48:1-4.9-11;

Psalm 80:2ac and 3b, 15-16, 18-19; Matthew 17:10-13

The disciples asked Jesus, Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first? Jesus replied, To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognise him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands.

Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist. (Matthew 17:10-13)

The true Light When doing research for this or that project over the years, I have noticed one difference (among many) between Catholic and Protestant religious culture. Protestant preaching and spiritual reading appeared to lay considerable stress on the Old Testament, without of course meaning to neglect the New. In sermons great space was given to Old Testament figures and lessons — and we see this in many of the wonderful sermons of John Henry Newman in his Anglican period. This, of course, was very good and it exploited to the full the inspiration of the entire Bible. However, I noticed that much of that discussion of Old Testament material was not directly connected with the Gospels. That is to say, figures and prophecies from the Old Testament would often be contemplated, discussed and applied without explicit reference to the Gospels. This is not to say that the preacher or writer himself meant to imply that the Old Testament was unconnected with the New. Nevertheless, it

was, I thought, an intriguing feature of much of Protestant religious culture as expressed in its writing. When I speak of “Protestant religious culture,” I am not thinking of those currents within the Protestant world that were Catholic in ethos. When we turn to Catholic religious culture, the emphasis always seemed to be different. While the Old Testament was defended as truly inspired by God, and the reading of it recommended to those able to use it with profit, recourse to it in preaching, teaching, and writing was usually had only in the context of the New Testament and in particular of the Gospels. The Old Testament was not pressed on the faithful, and it was not often used without explicit reference to the New, and in particular, to the Gospels. The stress was consistently on the New Testament, and especially on the Gospels. The Old Testament was used to light up aspects of the Gospels, and the Gospels were usually the prominent backdrop in any Old Testament reading. This is not the moment nor is there space to discuss the reasons for this difference in stress. I

merely wish to introduce the *connection* between the New Testament — especially the Gospels — and the Old.

In our Gospel passage today (Matthew 17: 10-13), our Lord is asked by his disciples about the great Old Testament prophet, Elijah. Our Lord and his disciples were coming down from the Mountain after the Transfiguration. As an aside, may I remark that the Transfiguration could be regarded as the greatest of Christ's miracles during his public ministry — prior to the Institution of the Holy Eucharist during the Last Supper and then his own Resurrection. While during his public ministry our Lord worked an astonishing range of miracles, in the case of the Transfiguration the miracle was worked on *himself*. He himself was transfigured and his great glory was revealed visibly. The Father spoke about him. As well as this, the Old Testament, the first Covenant, the Law and the Prophets — as embodied in Moses and Elijah seen conversing with Jesus — were shown as pointing to him. Jesus Christ is intimately connected with the Old Testament, and the Old Testament is to be understood in

light of him. If Moses and what are traditionally regarded as his books are read, they are read with Jesus Christ in mind as their fulfilment. If Elijah and the other prophets are read, they are read with Jesus Christ in mind. They themselves help us to understand Jesus Christ, and he is their fulfilment and their true key. As Jesus is going down the Mountain after the great Apparition and the Instruction from the Father, the disciples ask our Lord about Elijah whom they had just seen conversing with him. The teachers of the Law, they said to Jesus, maintain that Elijah must come first. Yes, he must come, our Lord concurred. But he has come — referring to John the Baptist. In John the Baptist Elijah was not acknowledged, and he was made to suffer — and so it will be with the Son of Man. We see here that Jesus Christ is the constant reference point. He is the key to the true understanding of the return of Elijah, as he is of Moses, the prophets and all that they are part of and represent. Let us love the entire corpus of Holy Scripture, knowing that we have in our hands its key —

Jesus Christ, about whom the Father said, “*This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!*”

Jesus Christ is not only the key to the entire Scriptures. He is the key to all of life, both the life of every individual, and the life of mankind. If we hold on to him, we hold in our hands the torch that lights up all. Without that light, we are in the dark. *I am the Light of the world*, he said. Whoever walks by me, is in the light. He who does not, is in the darkness. Let us resolve to stand by him, and not to lose our way, then!



Third Sunday of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Phil 4:4-5 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice. Indeed, the Lord is near.

Collect O God, who see how your people faithfully await the feast of the Lord's Nativity, enable us, we pray, to attain the joys of so great a salvation and to celebrate them always with solemn worship and glad rejoicing. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 35:1-6a, 10; Psalm 146:6-10;
James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Now when John had heard in prison the works of Christ he sent two of his disciples to ask him, "Are you he who is to come, or are we to look for another?" Jesus answered, "Go and relate to John what you have heard and seen. The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead rise again, the poor have

the gospel preached to them. Blessed is he who is not scandalized in me.” And when they went their way, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: “What did you go out into the desert to see? a reed shaken with the wind? What did you go to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Behold those who are clothed in soft garments are in the houses of kings. But what went you out to see? a prophet? yes I tell you, and more than a prophet. For this is he of whom it is written: Behold I send my angel before you, who shall prepare your way before you. Amen I say to you, there has not been born of woman a greater than John the Baptist: yet he that is the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” (Matthew 11:2-11)

Jesus Christ John the Baptist had the extraordinary mission from God of announcing the coming of the promised Messiah, and then of identifying him among the people. *There is the Lamb of God*, he told his disciples, pointing to Jesus who was walking by. With the exception of the mother of Christ herself and her holy spouse St Joseph, John knew more of the mission of Jesus Christ than

any other person — and his knowledge came from above. But there were limits to his knowledge. When Jesus actually got working, John may have been puzzled, because he sent his disciples to ask our Lord if he, after all, were the Messiah who was to come. Perhaps he expected something grander in our Lord's ministry, more impressive, "larger than life" and beyond the ordinary, something much more in the order of a divine judgment. It has to be said that this is not the only way to interpret the question which John asked his disciples to put to Jesus. The early Fathers had a variety of views on the point. While Justin and Tertullian thought that John experienced some form of doubt, Gregory the Great writes that "John, about to be put to death by Herod, sends his disciples to Christ, that by this opportunity of seeing his signs and wonders they might believe in him, and so learn through their master's enquiry" (*Catena Aurea*, Matthew 11: 2-6). Before Gregory, St John Chrysostom seems also to have thought that it was to confirm his disciples that John sent them to put this question. Whatever be the case, the

question itself is an occasion for us to contemplate yet again the Person of Jesus Christ. In fact, our Lord was far grander than anything hitherto, but there is a real sense in which he was “ordinary.” He was truly man, and the Gospels show how human our Lord was, and how immersed in the human condition he had placed himself. We can never appreciate sufficiently the two distinct yet closely associated natures in and through which our Lord’s ineffable Person lived and operated. He was truly man, and truly God. The Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us, letting his glory be seen in and through the human nature he took to himself. St John the Baptist was puzzled at what our Lord might have been about. He was about the work of Redemption. The Word became flesh in order to save us by reconciling us with God, who loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins. He became flesh so that thus we might know God’s love. Finally, he became flesh to be our model of holiness. The aspiration to be good is the most natural aspiration in the world — but it is easily smothered by our innate desire for

self-gratification and aggrandizement, and it is distracted by competing voices as to what it is to be good. The Christian fastens his gaze on Christ, as being both the Goal and the Means.

In his reply to John, our Lord pointed to the signs of the Kingdom of God in his ministry. When Peter spoke to the people following the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, he said that *“Jesus of Nazareth was a man whom God sent to you with miracles, wonders and signs as his credentials. These God worked through him in your midst, as you well know”* (Acts 2: 22). In his reply to John, our Lord pointed to the signs that attested that the Father had sent him, inviting belief in him. As we read, *“Jesus answered, ‘Go and relate to John what you have heard and seen. The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead rise again, the poor have the gospel preached to them. Blessed is he who is not scandalized in me’.”* Our Lord meant his miracles to strengthen faith in him and in his testimony about himself. By freeing some individuals from the earthly evils of

hunger, injustice, and death (as in the raising to life of the son of the widow of Nain), our Lord worked messianic *signs*, signs that he was the Messiah to come. Of course, he did not come to abolish all temporal evils during his public ministry. That would come at the end of the age. The signs he worked pointed to the greatest liberation of all, salvation from that slavery of sin which thwarts man in his vocation as God's son or daughter. The coming of God's kingdom means the defeat of Satan: *"If it is by the kingdom of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you"* (Matthew 12: 26-28). Christ's exorcisms are a sign of this: they freed some individuals from the domination of demons. They anticipated Christ's great victory over the ruler of this world (John 12: 31). The kingdom of God will be definitively established, not by what John may have been expecting of a Messiah, but through the Cross. His reign will be from the wood of the Cross at Calvary. We may presume that all of this our Lord was hinting at, obliquely, in his reply to John. It

seemed to satisfy John, for there were no more enquiries, and our Lord gave to him the highest praise.

As we think of John, uncertain about the course Christ was taking, and with little of his short life left to him, let us resolve to contemplate the Person and work of Jesus Christ. Let us keep before our eyes its redemptive mission and how he chose to pave the way for it during his public ministry. Christ, God and man, our Redeemer and our Friend, was and is about the business of our salvation and sanctification. Let us contemplate all that he is recorded in the Gospels as doing for us, looking on who he really is. He is our God and our Brother, and he has let his glory be seen. Let us then resolve to love him, follow him, and bear witness to him.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.456-460 (The Word became flesh); no.547-550: (Signs of the Kingdom).

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Second reflection: (James 5: 7-10)

Patience in life I have heard it said that, statistically, the majority of small businesses fold within a few years of their beginning. They invariably require great patience and perseverance. So too, the project of salvation and sanctification requires patience and perseverance. In the second reading, St James (James 5: 7-10) tells us to be *patient* until the Lord's coming. Think of the farmer, he continues, who patiently awaits "*the precious fruit of the ground*" until it has received the rains of autumn following the heat of summer, and the rains of spring following the winter. The Christian too must not lose heart, for the Lord is coming soon. Submit to difficulty with patience, for "*the Judge is already to be seen waiting at the gates.*" Much of life consists in fulfilling our responsibilities each day without much obvious reward or satisfaction. Indeed, at times a person may have to live out a tragedy or a disappointment for the whole of his life, or the frustration of lacking all he would like to have seen happen. As St James says, that person must be patient, because the Lord's

coming will be soon. God has his plan for each of us. He will come in all sorts of ways in life to console and sustain us. All we need to do is trust him and do his Will as well and as joyfully as we can.

It is joyful patience in the midst of adversity which is such a powerful witness in our modern world, a world which expects rewards for effort, and compensation for injustices and ills. The Christian, by his patient forgiveness, by refusing to lose heart, bears witness to the great doctrine that the Lord is coming soon. This coming of the Lord gives meaning to each person's life, and to the course of human history.



Monday of the Third Week of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Jer 31: 10; Is 35: 4 Hear the word of the Lord, O nations; declare it to the distant lands: Behold, our Saviour will come; you need no longer fear.

Collect Incline a merciful ear to our cry, we pray, O Lord, and, casting light on the darkness of our hearts, visit us with the grace of your Son. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the

Scripture today: Numbers 24:2-7.15 17; Psalm 25:4-9;
Matthew 21:23-27;

Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. By what authority are you doing these things? they asked. And who gave you this authority? Jesus replied, I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism- where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men? They discussed it among

themselves and said, If we say, 'From heaven', he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'From men'- we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet. So they answered Jesus, We don't know. Then he said, Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. (Matthew 21: 23-27)

All authority A frequent feature of the religious history of Israel was the rejection of the authority of its prophets. Elijah faced the rejection of his authority and he challenged the prophets of Baal to a formal confrontation. The miracle he worked on that occasion established his authority to a point — he successfully appealed to Yahweh to accept his sacrifice of the bull he had prepared over that of the prophets of Baal. Then he executed those prophets. His successor Elisha also worked miracles, which helped establish his authority. The prophet Jeremiah had to face stiff opposition to his prophetic authority. Though we do not have a record of his having worked miracles, he insisted repeatedly that he was called by God to act as prophet. He consistently foretold the doom of the city if

certain things were not done — and so it came to pass. Other prophets, such as Micah and Zechariah, faced the rejection of their authority. One gets the impression that the majority of prophets did not work miracles in order to vindicate their authority to speak on God's behalf. If they warned that a particular course would be successful, and if this did not come to pass, they stood discredited. The message which the true prophet proclaimed was its own proof — a rightly disposed person would know that what the prophet announced was indeed from God. The conscience of the hearer would confirm the message of the prophet. In the story of Jonah, the prophet preached, his authority was accepted, and the pagan city of Nineveh repented — without the support of miracles. John the Baptist was declared by our Lord to have been more than a prophet — he was the one Malachi foretold, the “angel” (messenger) going before him. John claimed to have been sent: *“He who sent me to baptize with water, the same said to me, ‘The one upon whom you see the Spirit descend, he is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit’”* (John 1:

33). He claimed the authority of being sent by God, and numerous rightly-disposed persons accepted his claim. He worked no miracles. Now, one of the most striking things about the ministry of Jesus Christ was the authority with which he appeared to act and to speak. He acted and spoke on his own authority.

We read repeatedly in the Gospels how the people stood in awe of the Person, the words and the deeds of Jesus. *He spoke with authority, not like the scribes.* That is to say, while the scribes and teachers of the Law brought forward their authorities to support their teaching, Jesus of Nazareth taught the people in the synagogues and elsewhere without appealing to that kind of support. You have heard that it was said of old, you shall not kill, and whoever shall kill will be in danger of the judgement — *but I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be in danger of the judgement* (Matthew 5: 21-22). In his teaching he acted as if he was the supreme authority in religion. He even said he was *Lord of the Sabbath*. He took matters into his own hand and cleansed the Temple of the buyers and sellers.

He acted as one having the authority to forgive sins. He commanded the evil spirits and they obeyed, as did the very elements. He was sure of his authority, exercised it, and no-one among the leaders could successfully shake his calm assurance of this authority. Time and again they gathered as a group to challenge him, and he silenced them. He always prevailed. The scene of our Gospel passage today is the Temple precincts, and our Lord is teaching the people. He is suddenly interrupted by the approach of the chief priest and elders of the people. In the presence of our Lord's audience, they demand to know by what authority he was doing these things. Could he point to any acknowledged authority who supported him — what were his references? Our Lord calmly routed them in the encounter: What do you make of John the Baptist? he asked. What of his authority? They refused to answer, because it would immediately vindicate Jesus, for John had testified to Jesus being the One who was to come. The clash left them silenced, and Jesus' own authority enhanced in the eyes of the people. Matters reached such a

pass that, as all the synoptic Gospels report, his enemies *dared not ask him any more questions* (Luke 20: 40; Matthew 22:46; Mark 12: 34). But what it also illustrates is that to accept the authority of Jesus Christ — as with each of the prophets before him — there must be a rightly-disposed heart, a true and religious conscience.

Jesus Christ is the highest of all authorities in the history of religion. He acted as such, claimed to be such, died precisely because of this claim, and was vindicated by his Resurrection and Ascension to glory. *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*, he told his disciples. *Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations*. All mankind is called to recognize his authority and to make it the basis of life. As the book of Revelation calls him, Jesus Christ is *the Lord of lords and King of kings*. Let us make this our faith and our message to others.



Tuesday of the Third week in Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Zec 14: 5, 7 Behold, the Lord will come, and all his holy ones with him; and on that day there will be a great light.

Collect O God, who through your Only Begotten Son have made us a new creation, look kindly, we pray, on the handiwork of your mercy, and at your Son's coming cleanse us from every stain of the old way of life. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Zephaniah 3: 1-2.9-13; Psalm 34:2-3, 6-7, 17-18, 19 and 23; Matthew 21: 28-32

Jesus said, What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' 'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I

will, sir, ' but he did not go. Which of the two did what his father wanted? The first, they answered. Jesus said to them, I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him. (Matthew 21: 28-32)

Beginning again One not-uncommon problem among those who have been blessed with a life that is not short, is the problem of a sense of futility. Life has brought its sorrows and disappointments. The person looks back on his youth and remembers hurts and frustrations. His marriage has also brought its disappointments, as has his career. He has gradually come to see that he has very real limits, that he cannot do very well certain things that make a mark on others and on the society around him. Perhaps he has reached a certain level of accomplishment in life, and he is reluctant to move beyond that for fear of further

disappointment and hurt. In the case of many, this may be over-stating the situation, but it is certainly to be noticed that the older person does not normally have the initiative that he had at an earlier age. The causes of this vary, of course, but it may be due to a certain disillusionment with both oneself and with life. There is the sense that it is not worth the bother of trying again, that any new attempts may once more bring further hurts and sorrows. Now, even humanly this is a pity because among man's greatest satisfactions is his work. The more he can do that is of service, the more fulfilled he will be. At any stage of life he is free to serve by his work, and the better the service through work, the greater will be his own fulfilment. Entertaining a sense of futility is not a good idea. But let us consider this pattern in a much more serious context — the context of man's religion, which is to say, his relationship with God. In his conscience he knows that he should strive to be good — indeed, very good. There is a vague sense within him that he should be aiming at being perfectly good, with no truck being allowed for moral evil.

To this innate sense there is addressed the command of God, confirmed by Jesus Christ, that we are to love the Lord God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and our neighbour as ourselves. By the call of our very nature, we should strive for goodness. By the call of God and Christ as expressed in historical Revelation, we are called to sanctity. But our disillusionment with life and with ourselves can lead us quietly to set this call aside as being unrealistic and futile, in view of past experience.

In our Gospel today (Matthew 21: 28-32), our Lord presents us with the parable of the two sons. The father went to the first son and asked him to go to work in his vineyard — and he refused. But afterwards he thought better of this and went. He went to the second and told him to do the same, and that son said he would go — but he did not go, after all. The context of this parable was our Lord's encounter with his enemies, the chief priests and elders, who had demanded to know by what authority he was acting as he was. Our Lord told them that they were like the son who said he would obey, but did not. The “*tax*

collectors and the prostitutes” were like the son who said he would not obey, but did. Now, while our Lord’s parable is directed in the first instance to this situation, it is applicable to all of us. We combine in ourselves both sons of the parable. We may look back on our lives and see that we have often said to God, yes I will obey you, but we have failed to do so. If we have anything like clarity of moral vision we shall see how poor and inadequate has been our obedience to God and the moral law. We have been like the second son, and precisely because of this we may have a certain disillusionment about our religious life and prospects. Without saying as much, we may tend very much to think that, granted who we are and our seeming inability to get on in the business of sanctity, life does not offer us much more in terms of a true religious flourishing. We may think we are more or less condemned to a course of spiritual mediocrity. We have been like the second son of the parable, saying yes to what God and a good life asks of us, but then failing to carry through with it. Such has been our life, and such it will continue to be. But no, for at

every point God calls us to be like the first son. We can hear his call anew, and like the first son who at first refused, we can begin again and proceed in a life of obedience. Let us liken our mediocre past life with the initial refusal of the first son. But he subsequently repented of his refusal and proceeded to do what his father wished. Let us begin again, as he did.

One of the most obvious differences between the existence of an Angel and that of the human being is that the human being has the chance of a new beginning at every point of his existence. He can make radically new choices for God (and against him). An Angel, it seems, concentrates his entire being and destiny in a single choice for God (or against him), because he sees with full clarity all the issues before him at once. Once his choice is made, the die is cast. But in our case, as long as life lasts, we human beings can begin again. No matter what be the past, I can start afresh and take my stand with God and Christ — provided I count on and depend on grace. So, whatever be

our past course, let us be like the first son who “changed his mind and went.” So then, now I begin!



Wednesday of the Third week in Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Heb 2: 3; 1 Cor 4: 5 The Lord will come and he will not delay. He will illumine what is hidden in darkness and reveal himself to all the nations.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that the coming solemnity of your Son may bestow healing upon us in this present life and bring us the rewards of life eternal. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 45: 6-8.21-25; Psalm 85: 9-14;

Luke 7:19-23

John sent two of his disciples to the Lord to ask, Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else? When the men came to Jesus, they said, John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, ‘Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?’ At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses

and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me. (Luke 7: 19-23)

Falling away Let us notice the structure of John's question as presented to Jesus: "*Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?*" John's question raises the matter of what man expects of God. The Old Testament contained some massive predictions. In the Book of Genesis, God tells the Serpent that the offspring of the woman "*will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel*" (3:15). That is a prediction, giving rise to expectations on the part of God's chosen people. There were further predictions in the Book of Genesis. God promises to Abraham that he would make of him a great nation, and that "*all the families of the earth shall find blessing in you*" (12: 2-3). Jacob, grandson of Abraham,

predicts that “*the sceptre shall never depart from Judah*” — “*until*” (as one reading of it would go) “*he comes to whom it belongs*” (49: 10). There are many predictions in other Books, especially those of the Prophets. All up, there was *at the very least* what we might call a great Likelihood ahead, an antecedent overwhelming Probability due to the word of God having been declared on the matter. But these predictions were not absolutely clear. In his *Wars of the Jews*, Flavius Josephus writes that “what most elevated them in undertaking this war (i.e., the great revolt against the Romans) was an ambiguous oracle that was found also in their sacred writings, how ‘about that time one from their country should become governor of the habitable earth.’ The Jews took this prediction to belong to themselves in particular, and many of the wise men were thereby deceived in their determination...” (Book VI, Ch.V). Josephus, a Jew of the Roman party, does not seem to dispute the validity of the oracles, and in particular the “oracle” about the coming world “governor” from “their country.” The pivotal question was the *interpretation* of the

oracle and what to do in consequence. But even apart from the sacred and inspired “oracles,” man finds himself with various expectations. He expects things of God. We need not go into the grounds of his expectations in both nature and in revelation. The question is, What to do when his expectations are not met by what happens in fact?

In our Gospel today, John’s disciples come to Jesus presenting John’s expectations. “*Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?*” It seems that John was puzzled and perplexed at what our Lord was doing — it seems that John had an image of the Messiah launching a dramatic rule that would inaugurate God’s kingdom. This image, developed on the basis of his reading of “the oracles,” was not in accord with news he was receiving. Our Lord’s answer is important for all of us: “*Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me*” (Luke 7:

19-23). The foundations in the Scriptures of John's expectations were right and sound, of course, but John had to leave behind his particular expectations and align his mind with that of God. There are other instances in the Gospels of people having to adjust their expectations. When Joseph saw that Mary his betrothed was with child, he was profoundly perplexed. His expectations were in a quandary, and it was when the Angel enlightened him that he was able to align his mind with that of God. When the Child Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, it was only after three days that Mary and Joseph found him — they could not understand his action. *Did you not know I must be about my Father's business?* Jesus asked. Their expectations had to adjust. When Christ began to be explicit about his coming rejection, his sufferings and his death, Simon Peter took him aside to remonstrate with him — this must not happen to you, he told Jesus. It went clean against all that Simon Peter expected and wanted. Simon had to change, and align his expectations to the plan of God. Every disciple of Christ must do this all along the

way, striving to align totally and perfectly his own wishes and expectations with the will of God. Now, some fail to do this — they “fall away on account of” Jesus and what he says or does. When our Lord announced the doctrine of the Eucharist in Capernaum, many of his disciples walked away from him. They fell away “on account of” him. Judas too fell away on account of him.

Let us pray to God for the grace to accept whatever God’s plan for us entails, and to accept fully and totally all that he has revealed of his saving and sanctifying plan in Jesus Christ. All that we expect in life should ultimately be based on our acceptance of God as God, and our consequent readiness to do his will when it is made manifest. It will mean shaping our expectations according to the will and teaching of Jesus Christ, and never the reverse — making the truth of his teachings in effect depend on our own expectations. That is the pivotal issue, and on it salvation depends.



Thursday of the Third week in Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 119 (118):151-152 You, O Lord, are close, and all your ways are truth. From of old I have known of your decrees, for you are eternal.

Collect Unworthy servants that we are, O Lord, grieved by the guilt of our deeds, we pray that you may gladden us by the saving advent of your Only Begotten Son. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 54: 1-10; Psalm 30: 2 & 4, 5-6, 11-12a, & 13b; Luke 7:24-30

And when the messengers of John had departed, Jesus began to speak to the people about John. “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? No? Then what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who go in for fine clothes and live luxuriously are to be found at court! Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more

than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he. All the people, even the tax collectors, who heard him, acknowledged God's plan as right by accepting John's baptism. But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John." (Luke 7: 24-30)

Praise I have seen several documentaries of occasions when Saint Jose-Maria Escriva, the Spanish priest who lived from 1902 to 1975 and who was beatified and canonized by Pope John Paul II, gave public addresses in different locations around the world. His practice was that after his address there would be questions from members of his audience. What was notable for me was not only his doctrine, but also his constant readiness to *praise*. He often *praised* the people who stood up to address him and ask their questions. He was very

encouraging, and left his interlocutors with the feeling that they had made progress along the path of goodness, and that they could make significant further progress. He gave hope and optimism because of his constant readiness to praise. I remember one lady stood up in the audience and told him that her son was a priest working in Africa — and Saint Jose-Maria told her that, yes, he knew him. Then he said he was a handsome priest, a holy priest, that he was doing excellent work in Africa, and that she had a son she ought be very proud of. Of course, his words brought great happiness to that lady and probably to her son. But as I have said, what I noticed was that readiness of his to praise. He was always very encouraging. I wonder how often we bring ourselves to praise others, and to praise them highly. It is often pointed out that among our highest duties is that of thanking and praising *God*. We should praise God for all that he is. Of course, we are helped to do this by being grateful. If we are full of thanks to God for all that he has done for us — including the sufferings he permits — then we shall be led on to praise him. But there

is another angle to this, and the example of Saint Jose-Maria Escriva reminds us of it. It is that God himself often *praises* us, his children. Consider the opening scene in the book of Job. Job is a blameless and upright man who feared God and avoided evil. God says to Satan: *“Have you noticed my servant Job, and that there is no one on earth like him, blameless and upright, fearing God and avoiding evil?”* Satan, though, immediately began to accuse Job. In this, he was unlike God who loves to praise (Job 1: 8-9).

Our Lord often praises people. After his baptism by John and before the commencement of his public ministry, our Lord attracted some of those who would be members of the Twelve. Among those first was Nathanael, brought to him by his friend Philip. Before they spoke to one another, our Lord praised him: *“When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he remarked, ‘This man is a true Israelite. There is no guile in him’.”* That is very high praise, and given freely. Again, there was the centurion who came to our Lord and asked very respectfully that he

cure his servant. He went on to tell our Lord that his mere word would suffice for the cure, as he himself was not worthy to have him enter under his roof. Our Lord was amazed at his faith, and turned to the crowd and told them that he *had not found such faith in all of Israel*. Our Lord readily gave high praise to the foreign centurion. In our Gospel today (Luke 7: 24-30), our Lord gives the highest praise to John the Baptist. *“Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.”* John, then, was no ordinary prophet. *“This is the one about whom it is written: ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’ I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John.”* But then comes, we might say, the punch-line, for even higher praise is due to the regime following that of John, and to which John’s life and ministry pointed. As our Lord says, *“the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”* Our Lord is saying that the Kingdom he is inaugurating is far more splendid than the regime of which John was part, and of which he was a peerless specimen.

The disciple of Jesus Christ has at hand a treasury of boundless resources of grace, enabling him to aim at high holiness. And so it is that the Church which Jesus Christ founded on the rock of Simon Peter has holiness as one of its distinguishing marks. Its holiness is present in the first instance in its Head, Jesus Christ. When we say that the Church is holy, we mean in the first place that its Head (Jesus Christ) and its Spirit (the Holy Spirit) are holy. Christ is the grand protagonist within the Church, and he is holy beyond compare and calculation.

We who are members of the Church by our baptism are members of Jesus Christ, for the Church is his mystical body. As members of Jesus Christ we have constant access to the grace of God, provided we are in union with Jesus Christ. God praises and encourages us in our efforts, and he looks forward to acknowledging us in the presence of his heavenly Father and all the angels. Let us be encouraged, then! Let us thank God and praise him for placing us in the kingdom of light, enabling us to renounce sin and Satan, and to put our shoulders to the work of being

good with a share in the goodness of Jesus Christ. Let us praise God, knowing that he will praise us.

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Second reflection: Psalm 119 (118):151-152 (Entrance antiphon)

You, O Lord, are close The first words from this entrance antiphon, taken from psalm 118, express a marvellous reality that we ought try to be very conscious of during Advent: the Lord our God is near, very near, and he is always coming with his grace if we open ourselves to him. We ought constantly think of the nearness of our great God. Look around at the world in which we live, its vastness, its beauty, its unimaginable complexity. It surely manifests the might and utter transcendence of God. Our Lord addressed his Father on one occasion as “*Lord of heaven and earth.*” Yet this great God of ours is very near to each one of us, and has revealed himself to be our Father, to whom we can constantly speak in the most intimate fashion, in an ever simple and immediate way.

Lord, you are near! Let us celebrate the nearness of God whom we cannot as yet see, but whom we shall one day see face to face in heaven.

We must constantly live in the presence of God, offering to him all our thoughts, words, joys and sufferings as our daily gift. Let us never allow ourselves to lose this sense of being in the presence of the One who is so very near. *“Lord, you are near, and all your commandments are just; long have I known that you decreed them forever.”* (Psalm 118:151-152).



Friday of the Third week in Advent

Entrance Antiphon Behold, the Lord will come descending with splendour to visit his people with peace, and he will bestow on them eternal life.

Collect May your grace, almighty God, always go before us and follow after, so that we, who await with heartfelt desire the coming of your Only Begotten Son, may receive your help both now and in the life to come. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 56: 1-3.6-8; Ps 66; John 5:33-36

Jesus said to the Jews: You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth. Not that I accept human testimony; but I mention it that you may be saved. John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light. "I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to

finish—the very works that I am doing—testify that the Father has sent me. (John 5: 33-36)

John and Jesus Christ As far as I am aware, there are only two sources of information about John the Baptist: the New Testament and Josephus. Of course, there are many critically important figures who feature nowhere except in the Scriptures. Were it not for the fact that the Bible mentions him (at some length and in different places), no one would now know of the existence of the great prophet Elijah. There is at least one stele (a slab with inscriptions) which, it seems, mentions King David (or the House of David), but were it not for the Bible (which alerted archaeologists to the stele in question), scarcely anything would be known of him. Nothing would have been known of Abraham and the Patriarchs, nor even of Moses. John the Baptist is referred to repeatedly in the writings of the New Testament. In the Gospel of St Matthew he is mentioned about 23 times, and some 18 times in the Gospel of Mark. In the Gospel of St Luke he is referred to about 24 times and in the Gospel of John

about 17 times. In the Acts of the Apostles he is spoken of about 9 times. He is also mentioned in the Letter to the Galatians. As said, the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus also mentions him in his *Jewish Antiquities* (18.5.2 116-119). Josephus writes of John that “*Herod had him killed, although he was a good man and had urged the Jews to exert themselves to virtue, both as to justice toward one another and reverence towards God, and having done so join together in washing. For immersion in water, it was clear to him, could not be used for the forgiveness of sins, but as a sanctification of the body, and only if the soul was already thoroughly purified by right actions. And when others massed about him, for they were very greatly moved by his words, Herod, who feared that such strong influence over the people might carry to a revolt – for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise – believed it much better to move now than later have it raise a rebellion and engage him in actions he would regret. And so John, out of Herod’s suspiciousness, was sent in chains to Machaerus*”. So, Josephus knew of reports about the Baptist and his

spiritual influence, but he was not dependent upon the Gospel — his somewhat tangled account of the nature of John's rite of baptism suggests a very different source for him. Josephus, of course, was writing some sixty years after John's death, and as a non-devotee.

What Josephus indicates is something of the spiritual stature and fame of John the Baptist as it struck a Jewish historian with other interests many decades later. What he writes may also indicate that John's true mission may have escaped some — we read in the Acts of the Apostles of Christian missionaries encountering disciples of John who knew little of Jesus. When Paul visited Ephesus he found disciples of John who did not know that, together with his baptism of repentance, John told “*the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus*” (Acts 19:4). It seems that some heard some things John said and moved on, while others heard other things and became disciples of Jesus as a result of his direct testimony to our Lord. What the Gospels give us is the character, person and true mission of this great man of God whose earthly

course was so brief (as was that of Jesus). His work of exerting the Jews to virtue, as Josephus puts it, and his immersion in water, as Josephus expresses it, was fundamentally preparing the people for the “good news” (Mark 3:18) of the imminent coming of “the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 3:2). Specifically, his mission was to “*make straight the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah said*” (John 1:23) – “*that he (i.e. the one standing among you), might be revealed to Israel*” (John 1: 29-31). All of this brings us to our Gospel today, in which our Lord refers to John. To begin with, our Lord tells us that John “*testified to the truth*” and that he “*was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light.*” So he truly bore witness to God’s truth as a great prophet, giving light as a lamp of God in the darkness. Christ accepted John’s testimony to him and invited his enemies to accept it as the testimony of an acknowledged prophet of God. This was powerful testimony indeed, but it was not the only testimony that Christ could appeal to. There were his “works”: “*I have testimony weightier than that of John.*

For the works that the Father has given me to finish—the very works that I am doing—testify that the Father has sent me” (John 5: 33-36). How many, how great they were, and how far above anything John did! He healed the impossibly sick, drove out demons, fed the multitudes, walked on the sea and calmed storms, spoke with unparalleled authority.

Christ’s greatest works, of course, were those manifested in and performed by his own Person. Greatest of all was the offering of himself to his Father on Calvary, the sacrifice of the Lamb of God taking away the sin of the world — as John predicted he would. Then, astounding work indeed, he rose from the dead as he predicted and on the day he predicted, the third day. He then ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of his heavenly Father. Then a further great work — he, together with the Father, sent the Holy Spirit to the Church. Thus he baptized with the Holy Spirit, as John had said he would. Let us think of John’s testimony, and how it was fulfilled in Jesus Christ.



December 17

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Is 49: 13 Rejoice, O heavens, and exult, O earth, for our Lord will come to show mercy to his poor.

Collect O God, Creator and Redeemer of human nature, who willed that your Word should take flesh in an ever-virgin womb, look with favor on our prayers, that your Only Begotten Son, having taken to himself our humanity, may be pleased to grant us a share in his divinity. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Genesis 49: 2.8-10; Ps 72:1-4ab, 7, 8,17;

Matthew 1:1-17

A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, Judah the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar, Perez the father of Hezron,

Hezron the father of Ram, Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David. David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah's wife, Solomon the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah, Abijah the father of Asa, Asa the father of Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat the father of Jehoram, Jehoram the father of Uzziah, Uzziah the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz, Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amon, Amon the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jeconiah and his brothers at the time of the exile to Babylon. After the exile to Babylon: Jeconiah was the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, Abiud the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor, Azor the father of Zadok, Zadok the father of Akim, Akim the father of Eliud, Eliud the father of Eleazar, Eleazar the father of Matthan,

Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ. Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Christ.
(Matthew 1: 1-17)

The King Any alert reader of the Gospels will immediately observe that St Matthew's account of Christ's ancestry is notably different from that of St Luke (Luke 3: 23-38). The two genealogies are basically the same from Abraham to David: Isaac, Jacob, Judah, Perez, Hezron, Amminadab, Nahshon, Sala/Salmon, Boaz, Obed, Jesse, David, are names common to both accounts. The differences become notable after David — even immediately after David. While Matthew mentions Solomon after David, in Luke it is Nathan who is listed as “the son of David.” There are some scholars who have therefore dismissed the genealogies as having no historical significance. But this is entirely gratuitous and goes clean against Luke's professed intention of being historical, and

Matthew's plain and matter-of-fact tone in presenting events in his opening chapter. Depending on how the Synoptics are dated, Matthew may have been aware of the sources behind Luke's Gospel, and Luke may have been aware of Matthew's sources. But neither inspired author provides us with an explanation of the differences. So, two millennia later, we are at a disadvantage — but it is no answer to dismiss the accounts as unhistorical. While there have been many attempts to harmonize them, there has been one great gain in Scriptural exegesis of the modern era, and that is the appreciation of the different *perspectives* of each inspired author. This obviously applies in the accounts of the infancy, including the genealogy of Jesus Christ. Matthew's first chapter, narrating the ancestry and birth of Christ, is plainly from the *perspective* of Joseph. We may surely take it that Matthew's sources list some principal names of the remembered (and recorded) genealogy of Joseph. Matthew's *dynastic* interest is perhaps shown in the mention of Solomon. Through Joseph, Christ is David's

son, and the promised King in the Davidic dynasty. Luke's *perspective* on Christ's infancy is that of *Mary*, his mother. One may guess that Luke's genealogy reflects his interest in Mary's perspective, and the remembered names in her line from David. Perhaps it showed primarily Christ's Davidic *ancestry*, leaving to other elements in his account (such as the words of the Angel to Mary) his being heir to the Davidic dynasty.

Our Gospel today is Matthew's account of the genealogy of Jesus Christ. Jesus is given his title — *Christos*, Anointed, Messiah — at the *outset*. It may even be said that this first sentence constitutes the proclamation which Matthew intends to unfold throughout his Gospel. *Jesus is the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham*. In our Gospel passage today, only two names are listed with their titles. There is "David the king," and there is Jesus "the Christ." This genealogy is about the promised *Kingship*. It is dynastic. The prophecy regarding it began with Abraham (though actually, at the very beginning) and was illustrated, and in figure launched, in David. Finally it

was found embodied in Jesus. Matthew also ingeniously shows the providential hand of the Lord God in the tightly symmetrical schema of ancestors that is presented. Throughout the history of the fulfilment of the Promise, there is a plan. It is shown in the three sets of “fourteen generations.” There are fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the deportation, and fourteen from that deportation to the birth of Jesus Christ. It is characteristic of a religious person that he gradually sees the hand of God at work in his past life. He becomes convinced of a particular Providence. Matthew is here bringing out the hand of the Lord in the history of his chosen people. From the distant past the inspired oracles had predicted the One who was coming, but the story of its fulfilment seemed confused and ambiguous. Matthew shows that amid all the crooked lines, God was writing straight. There was a straight line, in God’s plan, from Abraham to Jesus the Messiah. But only elements of that straight line were seen during the process. Light suddenly beamed here, and it suddenly beamed there, and all the

while a very human process, one marked by much sin, was unfolding. Ever so quietly, however, this turbulent and somewhat muddy stream arrived at its glorious, pure and radiant destination. Joseph and Mary, the most resplendent moral couple of all time suddenly appeared, though paradoxically enshrouded in their simple obscurity. From Mary came the Redeemer-King. God had written very straight in all the crooked lines.

Let us rejoice in the coming of Jesus the Messiah, son of Mary, foster-child of Joseph her husband, son of David, son of Abraham. He has come, and he will come again at the end. But he comes to us every day in all the little calls of duty and prayer. Let us stand ready always for his coming. He is the King of kings and the Lord of all lords. To him has been given all authority in heaven and on earth. He is the Head of the Church his body, and we are his members. Let us celebrate him during the Christmas season, and let us resolve never to stray from him.

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Second reflection (Matthew 1:1-17)

The saving providence of God We often speak of this or that event in life (or of an event in general history) as being providential. We mean that God has been clearly at work in the course of events bringing to us or to mankind some special blessing, or even some judgment on our past actions. Most of us have some sense of the fact that God our Father, the Lord of heaven and of earth, works in and through history to achieve his plan. We surely are granted a special sense of this as we read from the first chapter of Matthew's Gospel the genealogy of our Lord from Abraham to Mary his mother. Abraham had been promised that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed. In Matthew's account we have before us God achieving the greatest of his plans for mankind, the Incarnation. Something of the success and sureness of God's working in history is hinted at in Matthew's very symmetrical picture of the sum of generations prior to the arrival of the Messiah: *"fourteen from Abraham to David; fourteen from David to the Babylonian deportation; and*

fourteen from the Babylonian deportation to Christ.” God is the full master of his saving plan.

Let us entrust ourselves to the loving care of God our Father, receiving into our hearts the gift of his Son our Saviour, and the Holy Spirit our Sanctifier. Let us resolve to fulfil God’s plan in our life, so that his plan for all mankind may reach its end.



December 18

Entrance Antiphon Christ our King is coming, he is the Lamb foretold by John.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that we, who are weighed down from of old by slavery beneath the yoke of sin, may be set free by the newness of the long-awaited Nativity of your Only Begotten Son. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 23: 5-8; Psalm 72:1-2, 12-13, 18-19; Matthew 1: 18-24

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to

him in a dream and said, Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel — which means, God with us. When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.
(Matthew 1: 18-24)

The Saviour In the memory of the children of Israel, as expressed in their inspired books, there were many saviours. Joseph, son of Jacob and one of the twelve patriarchs, was a saviour to his father and his brothers despite what his brothers had done to him. As he said to his brothers when he revealed himself to them, *“Do not be distressed nor angry with yourselves that you sold me here; for God sent me before you to save life ... God sent me before you to preserve a remnant for you in the land, and*

to deliver you in a striking way. Not you but God sent me here..." (Genesis 45: 5-8). Joseph saved his family, and through them his people, from famine and death. Moses was the archetypal saviour in the memory of the Jewish people. In his encounter at the Burning Bush with the God of his father, "*the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob,*" he received his mission to take the children of Israel out of their land of slavery and oppression and to lead them "*into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.*" God said to him, "*Come now! I will send you to Pharaoh to lead my people, the Israelites out of Egypt*" (Exodus 3: 8-10). Moses saved his people from their physical oppression. Joshua completed the liberation effected by Moses, and various of the judges saved the people from the oppression of the Philistines. Samson's birth was foretold by the Angel, who said that "*It is he who will begin the deliverance of Israel from the power of the Philistines*" (Judges 13: 5). Samson was a saviour of his people from oppression, killing even more of the Philistines in his death than he did during life. There were

prophets who saved the people from the snares of idolatry. One thinks of the famous encounter of Elijah with the four hundred prophets of Baal, in which he was victorious — putting all of them to death. From the top of Carmel, he also brought rain to the earth, saving the people from famine (1 Kings 18). The notion of a saviour, not at all uncommon in the experience of mankind, was especially important in the story of Israel, the chosen people of God.

But a Saviour of a different order was dimly awaited. In the inspired account of the origins, the entry of sin and death is described in terms of the drama of man's original disobedience. God places the man and the woman in the Garden. The serpent tempts them to usurp the place of God by disobeying him, and they deliberately attempt that usurpation. It is the disaster of all history, leading to a catastrophic moral and physical fall, leaving man and his world seriously wounded and cut off from God. The second and third chapters of the Book of Genesis describe the origin and essential character of the worst slavery of all, and man's consequent need of a saviour. That Saviour

is dimly promised: “*I will put enmity between you and the woman,*” God says to the serpent, “*between your seed and her seed; he shall crush your head, and you shall lie in wait for his heel*” (Genesis 3: 15). It is somewhat vague, but lights up when read with the light of Jesus Christ. Various of the prophecies added light to the emerging picture. Some of the most magnificent were the Servant songs of the scrolls of Isaiah — their dates are disputed. A Servant of the Lord was coming who would bear on his shoulders the sins of the people. But now, with the sudden entry of the Angel into the life of Joseph, as described in our Gospel today (Matthew 1: 18-24), there is a sudden advance in the clarity of Revelation. Joseph need not be perplexed, for the child being borne by his holy betrothed is there by the power of the Holy Spirit. Then in one deft sentence, a new kind of Saviour is announced. Joseph will “*give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.*” Just what this will mean in the concrete, Joseph is not told. What will be the means of doing this, Joseph is not told. But the Child already conceived has a

most singular mission, to save his people not from political or physical oppression but from the most deadly oppression of all, that of *sin*. He will save his people from their *sins*. He will be a new Joseph, a new Moses, a new Samson, a new David, a new Elijah, the Servant par excellence of Isaiah, but far more than ever expected. He is the Redeemer of man, and will redeem him from his *sin*.

Let us appreciate the wonderful announcement of the Angel to Joseph. The Child of his betrothed is conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, and he will save his people from their sins. Our toughest fight, one that will last till the end, is our grappling with *sin*. We are born with our enemy already within the door. It resides within the house, and it is determined to take possession. By the mercy of God, there has been implanted in our house our most powerful Friend — God the Holy Spirit who empowers us to unite with Christ to resist and conquer the enemy within. Let us then unite ourselves to Christ and renounce sin and Satan. By his grace we have the vocation to attain sanctity.

Let us not squander this grace, but flourish in it all our days.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 1: 18-24)

Our Angel and Christmas During these days of Advent we are invited to prepare for Christmas in as spiritual a manner as possible, and day by day we have the Liturgy of the Word to help us make it so. Today we contemplate the Gospel scene of Joseph preparing for the birth of Mary's divine child. Joseph was full of perplexity and "*resolved to send her away privately.*" From a natural point of view, Joseph could not see for the darkness. He was taken out of this bewilderment by the intervention of the Angel who instructed him in the meaning of what was happening. The angel helped Joseph prepare for the first Christmas. Let us think of the Angels as we prepare for Christmas. Just as an Angel helped Joseph, so we ought expect the help of our own Guardian Angel. We ought ask our Angel for light, guidance and instruction. He will help

us to understand the ways and plan of God generally, and in our particular life too.

The Angels helped our Lady, St Joseph, our Lord himself (for instance, in the garden), and the early Church. They can and will help us. Let us love our Guardian Angel, and grow in devotion to him as we prepare for Christmas.



December 19

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Heb 10: 37 He who is to come will come and will not delay, and now there will be no fear within our land, for he is our Saviour.

Collect O God, who through the child-bearing of the holy Virgin graciously revealed the radiance of your glory to the world, grant, we pray, that we may venerate with integrity of faith the mystery of so wondrous an Incarnation and always celebrate it with due reverence. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Judges 13:2-7.24-25; Psalm 70;

Luke 1:5-25

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But

they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the

parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.” The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.” Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. “The Lord has done this for me,” she said. “In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people.” (Luke 1: 5-25)

Obedient faith While Revealed Religion plainly requires and depends on faith, there is a sense in which most of natural religion also depends on faith. By “natural religion” I mean the religion of man that is not the historical (Judaeo-Christian) Divine Revelation. Many examples could be given — such as the religion of the devotees of the Delphic oracle over the centuries of its classical heyday, or the numerous primal religions such as the Australian Aboriginal religions or the African Nuer religion, or numerous other religions. These bear witness to the native religious sense of man. Perhaps a distinction needs to be made in the case of some Asian religions (such as Buddhism), in which a personal deity is unacknowledged. Generally, I think, these “natural religions” do claim some kind of revelation by the spirits or the deities, and this is accepted by them in faith. The ancient Greeks were religious, and they accepted a range of gods and goddesses with their myths and rituals. So were the Romans. The great Greek philosophers looked askance at much of this belief, and bestowed on the West a singular

heritage of rational analysis. Still — and this is my point here — religious “faith” is obviously natural to man. Let that general point introduce the matter of faith in Revealed Religion. In divine, historical and objective Revelation the act and life of faith is absolutely essential. The one true God intervened in history and began to communicate with certain individuals. He declared his word. He required acceptance of it *in faith and obedience* to its directives, and promised blessings as a result of a faith that issued in obedience. Perhaps the archetypal instance of this is God’s entry in the life of Abraham. Abraham was distinguished for his *faith*. We read that Abram (with various of his family and relatives) settled in Haran, and that “*the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land I will show you ... and I will bless you .. and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves. So Abram went as the Lord had told him*” (Genesis 12:1-4). We remember how well Abraham passed the test of faith in the account of the command to sacrifice Isaac.

St Paul refers to Abraham as our father in faith. We read in Genesis 15: 5-6 that God promised to Abraham that his descendants will be as the stars of heaven. Abraham's response to God's word? "*And he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness*" – a statement which, as we know, St Paul takes up and uses to illustrate his doctrine on *faith in Christ* as what justifies us (Romans 4:18). But it seems that Abraham did fail at times in faith, for we read a little later that "*God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife ... I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations ...' Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, 'Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old?'*" (Genesis 17: 15-17). In what might be an alternative tradition (or simply a different event), in the following chapter it is Sarah who laughs (18:12-15). Still, God was faithful to his promises. The point here, though, is that Scripture manifests how fundamentally important in Revealed Religion is *faith in God's word and obedience to him*. Again, famously, Moses was the friend of God and the great prophet who

foretold the coming of the Prophet (i.e., Jesus). He heard the word of the Lord God, accepted it in faith, and delivered it on God's behalf to the people. They promised that they would accept all that God announced to Moses, and observe it. Faith was at the foundation, but equally famously, at one point, Moses too failed in faith. In Numbers 20:8, the Lord told Moses, *"Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water. You will bring water out of the rock for the community so they and their livestock can drink."* Numbers 20:9-11 tells of Moses' response: *"So Moses took the staff from the Lord's presence, just as He commanded him.... Then Moses raised his arm and struck the rock twice with his staff. Water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank."* Numbers 20:12 gives us the Lord's response, *"But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not trust in me enough to honour me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them'."* Moses did not

simply *speak* to the rock, but *struck it twice with his staff*, certainly in disobedience to God and without faith in his word. For this he was sincerely punished.

All of this brings us to our Gospel passage today (Luke 1: 5-25), and to the two holy persons, exemplary instances of Old Testament religion. I refer to Zechariah and Elizabeth: “*Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly.*” Yet, as we see, Zechariah did not, at first, believe the word of God given him by the angel. This was not at all pleasing to God, and he was punished for it: “*Now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.*” Let us prize the supernatural and priceless gift of *faith* that we have received, guarding it against temptation, and understanding that it is the basis of holiness and our eternity with God.



Fourth Sunday of Advent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Is 45: 8 Drop down dew from above, you heavens, and let the clouds rain down the Just One; let the earth be opened and bring forth a Saviour.

Collect Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord, your grace into our hearts, that we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ your Son was made known by the message of an Angel, may by his Passion and Cross be brought to the glory of his Resurrection. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 7:10-14; Psalm 24:1-6;
Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-24

This is how the birth of Christ happened. When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. Whereupon Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing publicly to expose her, intended to put her away privately. But while he thought on these things, behold the

angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, fear not to take to yourself Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son and you will call his name JESUS. For he will save his people from their sins.” Now all this was done so that what was spoken by the prophet might be fulfilled, “Behold a virgin will be with child and will bring forth a son, and they will call his name Emmanuel, which means, God with us.” And Joseph waking from his sleep did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife to himself. (Matthew 1:18-24)

Christmas and sin Several years ago there appeared in the Opinion page of the *Sydney Morning Herald* (18 December 2004) an article by a regular feature writer who was the mother of a few children. None of her children, she happily wrote, believe in God. “My children were bequeathed (from their grandparents) a rich religious heritage but they have turned out to be ‘none’: non-scripture, non-believers, non-religious. Before they were

13, they were declared atheists.” “The idea of going to church on Sunday ,” she continued, “seemed to them to be ludicrous. If they had any religion, it was sport.” All this did not worry the mother. She wrote that the lack of a religious upbringing had brought no damage to them, nor to others whom she knew in similar households. What matters to children, she opined, is being loved, having stability, financial security, some rules and boundaries, and being able to communicate with their parents. Religious observance was superfluous to their happiness. Indeed, it exposes children to guilt and boredom. The title of her article was that “the godless, humanist kids are all right.” Her very interesting article showed one thing: the absence of a sense of sin. She was oblivious to the profound sinfulness that is part and parcel of our life. Of course, she therefore saw no need to be delivered from this condition. “Sin,” understood specifically as an offence against God (as distinguished from mere wrongdoing), scarcely occurred to her, and it certainly did not matter to her children. She did not believe that God had revealed

anything about it, nor that there is a wonderful *answer* to this need, an answer coming from the God whose existence she and her children denied or utterly ignored. That answer is the Person of Christ. God calls us to a happiness that only he himself can satisfy, and which he wants to satisfy. His plan is to bring us happiness through the fulfilment of his will as expressed in both the natural moral law and in his revealed law. Our problem, lost from the view of the columnist just mentioned, is that we are sinners and we cannot of ourselves overcome the tendency we have to disobey and disregard the will of God, which alone takes us to our true happiness. This is mankind's basic problem, and salvation is at stake.

All mankind is faced with two alternatives: heaven or hell. Every person will finally be either in heaven or hell, and the one thing that takes each person away from God's will and therefore from heaven, is *sin*. Sin has to be overcome, and of ourselves we cannot overcome it. It matters critically that we recognise sin and, with it in full view before us, take the means to defeat it. Now, this is

what Christmas is all about. This is what Christmas celebrates. It celebrates the divinely-granted means of overcoming the one thing that can deprive mankind of ultimate bliss. Let us listen again to the words of the angel to Joseph as given in the Gospel: *“Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”* God was coming, and has come in the Person of Jesus Christ, precisely to save us from our *sins*. In the process of taking away sin, he gave us something far more wonderful, a share in his own divine life that comes from union with him in baptism and in the other sacraments. If we have a lively sense of our sinful condition, we will appreciate the inestimable benefit of the coming of Jesus. If our sinful condition matters very little to us, if we do not recognise it as such, if other things matter far more, if we are satisfied with the things that this world has to offer and with our own moral and spiritual state, then the coming and the presence of Christ in our lives will seem utterly

superfluous. All of this was encapsulated in the interesting but very sad newspaper article I mentioned. Let us prepare for Christmas by thinking of what our Lord came to do for us, as stated by the angel to Joseph, while Jesus was still in the womb. He came to save us from our sins. Years later at the beginning of his public life, St John the Baptist pointed him out and said, “*There is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*” Let us recognise that the defeat of sin is what matters, and that the coming of Christ is the means whereby this is done.

The columnist I mentioned was a self-professed secular humanist. Her children had no religion but, she boasted, they “are kind and loving, smart, decent and tolerant. They think for themselves, and they ask questions. You’d have to be proud of them.” Such is the tragedy of secular humanism. By contrast, for the believer, Christmas celebrates the tremendous event of the coming of the Redeemer. Jesus Christ has come, and he gives himself to us in the ministry, in the preaching and teaching, and in the sacraments of the Church, a self-donation that

redeems us from sin and makes us holy in his sight. This is the Good News which ought set the world celebrating, and if a secular-humanist world does not celebrate it, let us for our part understand the treasure we have been given, and rejoice in the boundless goodness of God.

Further Reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*
1950 1964: (God's law)



December 20

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Is 11:1; 40: 5; Lk 3: 6 A branch shall sprout from the root of Jesse, and the glory of the Lord will fill the whole earth, and all flesh will see the salvation of God.

Collect O God, eternal majesty, whose ineffable Word the immaculate Virgin received through the message of an Angel and so became the dwelling-place of divinity, filled with the light of the Holy Spirit, grant, we pray, that by her example we may in humility hold fast to your will. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 7:10-14; Psalm 24:1-6;

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David.

The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you. Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end. How will this be, Mary asked the angel, since I am a virgin? The angel answered, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God. I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered. May it be to me as you have said. Then the angel left her.

(Luke 1: 26-38)

Scripture and Church During the year 2010 the Holy See promulgated an arrangement (called a “Constitution”) whereby bodies of Anglican clergy and laity, having accepted Catholic doctrine, could seek communion with the See of Rome with the prospect of continuing to live with many elements of their traditional religious culture within the Catholic fold. This was in recognition of the riches of Anglicanism, and an acknowledgment that these riches could enhance the life of the Catholic Church, as had many Uniate Eastern Catholic bodies in the past who entered into full communion with the See of Rome. Now, one of these riches is the great emphasis placed on Sacred Scripture — an emphasis characteristically shared by the Protestant world. The error of Protestantism, as the Catholic Church has taught it to be, has never been this emphasis as such. What the Catholic Church has taught to be an error is the particular kind of exclusive emphasis summarised in the dictum, *Sola Scriptura* (by Scripture alone). This implicitly propounds that Revelation is contained in Scripture *alone*, and confers

on the individual reader the final authority to determine what Scripture teaches to be revealed. It denies that the Church's Tradition is a formal means of the transmission of this Revelation, and denies too the authority of the Church to determine both the sense of Scripture and what has been revealed. The Catholic Church insists that in the first instance Christ entrusted himself and his revelation to his living Church which he founded on the Twelve with Peter as its visible Rock. This is not the moment to survey the issues involved in this dramatic controversy, but it ought be recognized that the Protestant stand on Scripture has had a profound influence on what the *average* person takes to be the criterion of Christian belief. It has had a powerful effect on the Western religious mind. Commonly, a person accepts that a teaching is Christian if it can be shown to be taught by the Bible, and in particular by the New Testament. Conversely, if this cannot be shown, then there is thought to be no warrant for saying that a particular point is part of the teaching of Jesus Christ.

Now, of course, this common assumption is just that — it is an *assumption*. It is assumed that it is only Scripture which is the repository of divine Revelation, and that it is only by means of Scripture that the individual believer comes to know and understand this Revelation. This is a principle which began with Protestantism, though there were occasional precedents. It was never the position of the Church, nor can it be shown to have been taught by Christ, nor is it formally taught anywhere in Scripture itself. The great dogmas of the first ecumenical councils were not determined primarily by debates with heretics on the textual meaning of the Scriptures. When Arius propagated the notion that the Person of Jesus Christ was not divine, the Council of Nicaea did not reaffirm the divinity of Christ because Arius had been defeated in *Scriptural* analysis and debate. The ground of his condemnation consisted in his manifest departure from what had been the faith of the Church. The belief of the Church as discerned and formulated by the Church's bishops in union with the See of Rome was the criterion of

the truth being applied. Nor did this involve a *neglect* of Scripture, but Scripture (as analysed and explained by this or that teacher and his following) was not the sole indicator of revealed truth. Truth to tell, the dogmas of the Church — such as that Jesus Christ is divine (Council of Nicaea), and that his mother must be regarded as, and called, the Mother of God (Council of Ephesus) — indicate what is to be found in Scripture, even if at first sight it is veiled. It is not so much that some of the formal dogmas of the Church are not to be found in Scripture. Rather, the teaching Church, by the assistance of the Holy Spirit, enables the faithful to discern in Scripture what might be otherwise missed. The Church in her teaching and dogma forms the mind of the faithful to read Scripture with a fuller understanding, an understanding moulded by what the Church knows and teaches to be revealed by God. It was to the teaching Church that Christ sent the Spirit of truth, to teach her “*all things and to remind you of all I have told you*” (John 14: 26).

A case in point is the Church's doctrine on the Virgin Mary. Our Gospel passage today (Luke 1: 26 38) is rich in its presentation of her figure. The Angel greeted her as the favoured one, the one fully in the grace and favour of God. The Church has formally declared that this grace and favour was hers from the first moment of her conception to the last moment of her life. Never did she sin, and death could not retain its hold on her. She now is in glory in heaven, body and soul, our mother given to us at the Cross by her divine Son. Mother of God made man, she is, as the Second Eve, mother of mankind and especially mother of the Church. Let us be grateful for Christ's gift to us of the Church, which is the pillar and ground of the truth, lighting up the meaning of Scripture and opening before us the treasures of divine Revelation.

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Second reflection: (Luke 1:26-38)

Preparing for Christmas with Mary St Paul tells one group of Christians: *Be imitators of me, as I am of*

Christ. Jesus our Saviour would say to us that these words of Paul may be understood as pre-eminently words of Mary. Mary is the first and the perfect Christian, the closest disciple of our Lord, his perfect imitator and image. Elsewhere among his letters, St Paul says, “*let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*”. The mind and heart of Mary perfectly mirrors that of Jesus. She is our model, and of course she is our mother because she is the mother of the Redeemer. Let us then prepare for Christmas by being filled with the thoughts of the Saviour that filled her mind. We know what they were in essence, because we have the words of the angel addressed to her at the Incarnation. Undoubtedly the account of them comes ultimately from her. They would have been etched on her mind and heart with a tremendous vividness. She would have pondered on them endlessly — for they were words that came from heaven. She treasured and pondered on them in her heart especially as the day of the birth of the Messiah, whom she carried in her womb, approached. Those words of the angel tell us about Christ and his grandeur. No other figure

in history can compare with him. *“Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end”* (Luke 1:31-33).

Let us think of these words in union with Mary as we prepare to celebrate Christmas.



December 21

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Is 7: 14; 8: 10 The Lord and Ruler will be coming soon, and his name will called be Emmanuel, because he will be called God-with-us.

Collect Hear in kindness, O Lord, the prayers of your people, that those who rejoice at the coming of your Only Begotten Son in our flesh may, when at last he comes in glory, gain the reward of eternal life. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Song of Songs 2:8-14 or Zephaniah 3:14-18; Psalm 33; Luke 1:39-45

At that time Mary rose up and went in haste to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: Blessed are you among women, and blessed

is the fruit of your womb! But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished! (Luke 1:39-45)

Holy Spirit One of the many notable features of each of the Gospels is the sudden introduction of the Holy Spirit. Of course, the Spirit of God is referred to many times in the Old Testament. In Job 33:4 Elihu says that the “*spirit of God made me.*” Elsewhere, “*the spirit of God*” indicates God’s creative activity (Genesis 1:2) and active power (Isaiah 40:13). The spirit of God also works in providence (Job 33:4; Psalm 104:30), in redemption (Ezekiel 11:19; Ezekiel 36:26-27), in upholding and guiding his chosen ones (Nehemiah 9:20; Psalm 143:10; Haggai 2:5), and in the empowering of the Messiah (Isaiah 11:2; Isaiah 42:1; Isaiah 61:1). In short “*the spirit of God*” is God himself in action. While the Christian in his reading of the Old Testament would naturally see these texts as

referring, at times explicitly and at times obliquely, to the Person of the Holy Spirit, such an interpretation would never occur to a reader prior to the coming of Jesus Christ. But at the outset, each Gospel includes in its very first chapter an explicit mention of the action of the Holy Spirit. St Matthew, having given seventeen verses to the genealogy of Jesus Christ, introduces his birth with the matter-of-fact statement that “*Mary ... was found with child of the Holy Spirit*” (1:18). Joseph is then informed by the Angel that “*what is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit*” (1: 20). In both statements there is a definite title, “*the Holy Spirit*,” denoting a distinct, divine Agent, perhaps even more clearly than would the expression “*Spirit of God*.” In the Gospel of Mark, where there is no discussion of the birth and infancy of Jesus, the “*Holy Spirit*” — the same term again — is introduced with the proclamation by John of the mission of the coming Messiah. “*I have baptized you in water, but he will baptize you in the Holy Spirit*” (1:8). Then, in the form of a dove, “*the Spirit*” descends on the newly-baptized Messiah. In

the Gospel of St John, John the Baptist bears witness to the descent of “the Spirit” on Jesus, and to Christ’s mission of baptizing “in the Holy Spirit” (1:33). In each of Matthew, Mark and John, the Holy Spirit is mentioned as a divine Protagonist with whom the reader is quite familiar.

While in Mathew, Mark and John the Holy Spirit is mentioned once or twice in the opening chapter of each, in Luke He is mentioned four times in his opening chapter. The Angel Gabriel tells Zechariah that “*the Holy Spirit*” will fill his great son even from his mother’s womb (1: 15). The same Angel informs the Virgin Mary that the “*Holy Spirit*” will come upon her, and the One to be born of her will be called “*the Son of God*” (1:35). When Mary greets Elizabeth, “*the child leapt in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit*” (1:41). Thereupon she spoke with a loud voice blessing Mary and the Child of her womb (1:42). A little later, Zechariah is “*filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied*” of his son John (1:67). So Luke displays a special love for and interest in the Holy Spirit, a love and interest which is shown also in his Acts of the

Apostles. In his Gospel, the Holy Spirit comes upon Mary. He effects the coming of the Messiah who, we learn elsewhere, will baptize in the Holy Spirit. He then comes upon the unborn Precursor, upon his mother Elizabeth and upon his father Zechariah. These are the persons who make up the opening chapter of the Gospel of St Luke, and the Holy Spirit as the divine Protagonist enters their lives to launch the Redemption of man. This is to say that Luke begins his Gospel by presenting the Holy Spirit, and showing at the outset the pre-eminent importance of his action in the story of the redemption. Our Gospel today (Luke 1:39-45) is Luke's description of the meeting of Mary with her kinswoman Elizabeth, and the Holy Spirit is the decisive Actor. The Angel had predicted to Mary that the son of her kinswoman would be filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb, and so it was. Mary arrives and the Holy Spirit descends on the unborn child, but he also descends on his mother Elizabeth. She, then, "*in a loud voice*" utters an inspired blessing on Mary and the fruit of her womb. That this double arrival of the Spirit of God

occurs at the coming of Mary is surely significant, and to be noticed by every Christian reader. If Mary comes to us, we can expect a further coming of the grace of the Holy Spirit, as happened with Elizabeth and her unborn son.

There is a famous prayer which includes the words of Elizabeth, uttered under the power of an inspiration from the Holy Spirit who had come to her. “*Blessed are you among women,*” Elizabeth said to her, “*and blessed is the fruit of your womb.*” That prayer is prayed daily by countless numbers: “*Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you.*” These are the words of the Angel. “*Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.*” These are the words of Elizabeth in our Gospel today. “*Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.*” Let us pray that prayer daily, and pray it well.

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Second reflection (Luke 1:39-45)

The coming of Mary before Christmas

Christmas is very near, so let us take the lead offered us by the word of God each day, and prepare with Mary the Mother of Jesus. She had the Messiah within her womb, yet she *“set out at that time and went as quickly as she could to a town in the hill country of Judah. She went into Zechariah’s house and greeted Elizabeth”* (Luke 1: 39). That is to say, she gave herself over selflessly to the care of another — her kinswoman Elizabeth. Let us make our needs known to her during these days as we in our turn prepare to celebrate the coming of the Lord. She, Mary our Mother and the Mother of the Lord, will hasten to us as she hastened to Elizabeth. She will greet us, gaze upon us, attend to us. Most especially, she will bring Jesus into our lives with her coming, together with the Holy Spirit. *“Now as soon as Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leapt in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit”* (Luke 1: 40). St Paul tells us that in Christ we receive

every heavenly blessing, and Christ came to mankind in and by means of Mary.

Let us resolve too, during this Christmas period, to take Mary not only as our Mother but as our Model. Let us resolve to be imitators of her in our everyday life, attending selflessly, silently, humbly, in our everyday and very ordinary life to the needs of those around us, just as she did. We in our turn due to our baptism, confirmation and reception of the other sacraments bear Christ within us. We have the mission to bring him to others in our everyday life through our service of their needs. Let us take our cue from Mary.



December 22

Entrance Antiphon Ps 24 (23):7 O gates, lift high your heads; grow higher, ancient doors. Let him enter, the king of glory!

Collect O God, who, seeing the human race fallen into death, willed to redeem it by the coming of your Only Begotten Son, grant, we pray, that those who confess his Incarnation with humble fervour may merit his company as their Redeemer. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Samuel 1:24-28; 1 Samuel 2:1, 4-7;
Luke 1:46-56

And Mary said: My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me- holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to

generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants for ever, even as he said to our fathers. Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home. (Luke 1: 46-56)

Close and active An important result of the advent of the scientific age was that people far more readily explained the happenings of life in terms of natural causes. In classical Roman myth, Neptune was god of water and the sea, brother of Jupiter and Pluto, and analogous with the Greek god Poseidon. He was, for instance, thanked for naval victories. To a point the gods took the place (and were a projection) of the laws and forces of nature — and we see this in much of popular religion over the millennia. With the rise of science and its domination of Western culture, the divine seemed unnecessary. Perhaps this was

because all too frequently the “divine” had been regarded as simply that which accounted for happenings that otherwise had no explanation (a “deus ex machina”). For believers, science has helped purify their notion of God as the transcendent Stay of all that is, including the laws and forces of the world. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) began to tell on popular religious belief. If natural selection was the law or natural force which brought new species into existence, why was there need for recourse to a Creator? Deeper minds immediately integrated the possible hypothesis of natural selection into their religious world-view. Newman, for instance, saw no problem in Darwin’s scientific proposal. It simply required that we place God’s creative activity at a deeper level — the process of natural selection itself was in the hand of the Creator, and was an integral part of his creative activity. However, science in the hands of those not disposed to believe in a supernatural realm and in historical Revelation, told on Western culture. God was ignored and set aside as

not needed, irrelevant, and while deemed allowable for pious fancy, was easily done without. God reverted, we might say, to the status of the typical high god of natural religions. He got things going, and then retired from the scene as having done his one and only work. The Creator became the Initiator, and having initiated, was lost from sight. Putting it in more modern terms, he set off the Big Bang, and then the world with its natural laws did and does the rest.

This is to say that a very common image of God for modern man is of a God who is very inactive. He does very little. It is thus a disappointing experience to rely, for instance, on prayer — prayer does not work much, because God seems inaccessible and immoveable. Life carries on without him, and the successful person is the person who takes life into his own hands rather than regarding it as being in the hands of God. All this is to say that our danger now is to think that in effect the world is all there is, and that the only true activity going on is that which we see, hear, touch or smell. The only agents of change are

physical or moral, but certainly not supernatural. Karl Marx decried religion as leaving the masses with their foolish pie in the sky, and therefore, we might add, with no pie on the plate. But now, what is the God of Revelation really like? He is a very active God, though respecting the laws of nature — the laws that he himself implanted in the constitution of the world. In our Gospel today we have the soaring prayer of the mother of the Messiah, the one whom the Angel addressed as full of grace and with whom the Lord abode. We could say that Mary's prayer as given in Luke is a powerful summary of the spiritual vision of the living God that characterizes the Old Testament and takes it into the New. What does Mary say of the Lord God? She praises him precisely for his *powerful activity*. He is very active in the world. He can be depended on by the lowly to defend and protect them. Consider how active he is: "*the Mighty One has done great things for me- holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost*

thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants for ever, even as he said to our fathers” (Luke 1: 46-56). Mary’s prayer, encapsulating supernatural Revelation to that point, shows that God is intensely and powerfully *active* in the world.

If we wish to gain a true idea of the intense activity of God in the world, we must immerse ourselves in the Scriptures, and read them with the mind of the Church. Just how God acts in the world while respecting the laws which he has made to govern the world, is not our concern here. What we must do is deepen our awareness of the immediacy of God. He utterly transcends the world, but at the same time he is unimaginably immanent to it. His finger touches every shade of created reality and he hears all our whispers and sighs to him. In this, as in all, let Mary be our teacher.

Second reflection: (Luke 1:46-56)

Mary the servant of the All Merciful We are blessed in having the inspired prayer of Mary as she awaited the birth of her Son the Redeemer. Mary extols the greatness of God. *God is great!* she exclaims. This prayer, incidentally, ought commend her to every Muslim, who, likewise, exclaims that God is great. But let us notice how Mary sees this greatness of God — great especially in his power — being manifested. God manifests his great power in his *mercy*. The divine plan of salvation is his great act of power and mercy. God does wonderful things for his lowly servants. Mary exults in God as her Saviour, because he has looked upon his lowly handmaid. The Almighty has done great things for her. Mary is the servant of the great God who is all merciful.

Now, we are Mary's spiritual children, so let us contemplate how great God is, precisely in his mercy as shown in his saving plan in Christ. Let us see and learn of

this in the inexhaustible treasures of Revelation, and in the course of our own individual lives, marked as they are with suffering and disappointments. Let God write the book of our life, and let him achieve his plan. We are his lowly servants gathered around Mary, the first and foremost Christian, mother of Christ and mother of the Church. God alone is great, and his plan for all shows forth his mercy.



December 23

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Is 9:5; Ps 72 (71):17 A child shall be born for us, and he will be called God, the Almighty; every tribe of the earth shall be blest in him.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, as we see how the Nativity of your Son according to the flesh draws near, we pray that to us, your unworthy servants, mercy may flow from your Word, who chose to become flesh of the Virgin Mary and establish among us his dwelling, Jesus Christ our Lord. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Malachi 3:1-4, 23-24; Psalm 25:4-5ab, 8-10 and 14; Luke 1:57-66

When it was time for Elizabeth to have her child, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father

Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said, No! He is to be called John. They said to her, There is no one among your relatives who has that name. Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, His name is John. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. The neighbours were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, What then is this child going to be? For the Lord's hand was with him. (Luke 1: 57-66)

John A principal focus of our Gospel passage today is the naming of the child of Elizabeth and Zechariah. It is worth pondering carefully, and in context. The Gospel of St Luke, introduced with an assurance of its historical reliability, begins with the annunciation by the Angel of the birth of the Precursor of the Messiah. The Angel tells Zechariah not to fear. His prayer has been heard, and his

wife will bear him a son, and he will give him the name of John (1: 13). So the naming of the child as John is obviously important, for it is the first thing that the Angel does, after which there follow four verses of description of the child. When we turn to the next great event of the chapter some six months later, one that surpasses the annunciation to Zechariah, there is a similar pattern. The same Angel appears to Mary. In Zechariah's case, he sees the Angel, is troubled and fear falls upon him — at which the Angel reassures him, telling him not to fear. In Mary's case, the Angel instantly speaks to Mary, greeting her fulsomely as one full of grace, with whom the Lord abides. Then Luke tells us that Mary was “greatly disturbed”, whereas Zechariah had been “disturbed”. While Zechariah is troubled and full of fear at the angelic apparition, Mary was “deeply troubled” at the overflowing respect with which the Angel had addressed her. Moreover, while Zechariah was “*troubled, and fear fell upon him,*” “*fear*” is not explicitly attributed to Mary — perhaps it is included in her being “*greatly disturbed.*” The Angel tells Zechariah

not to fear, and the reason is given: for his prayer was heard. His wife would bear him a son whom he would name John. The Angel, having warmly and respectfully greeted Mary (which he did not do to Zechariah), likewise tells her not to fear — but this time the reason is that she has found favour with God. He then informs her that it is God's plan that she bear a son whom she will name Jesus. In both cases, the naming of the child follows fast on the commencement of the angelic address. In each, the conception of the child is spoken of, and the name is thereupon given.

It is clear, then, that the name is important. In both cases, God himself has insisted on giving the name. The prerogative of the parent is set aside, for in each case the child will have a course of life determined by a divine mission. In Luke's Gospel, the Angel gives no explanation of why the names were given. He informs Zechariah that he is to call his son *John*, and he informs Mary that she is to name her son *Jesus*. This stated, he then proceeds to describe each child and his mission. In Matthew's Gospel

(1: 21), the Angel instructs Joseph to name the child Jesus “*for he will save his people from their sins.*” So the very name “*Jesus*” (God saves) expresses his mission as Saviour. This is not explained in Luke, but we may presume that it was understood. So then, the naming of the Precursor by Heaven was very important. Indeed, this importance is illustrated by a further detail in our Gospel passage today (Luke 1: 57-66). While we have been told that Zechariah learnt the name John from the Angel, suddenly Elizabeth requires that he be named John — perhaps she too has been illuminated by Heaven on the matter. Of course, Zachariah may simply have told Elizabeth of the child’s name by way of a tablet. In any case, its choice by heaven shows that the name is significant. “*John*” is derived from the Latin *Ioannes*, which is in turn a form of the Greek. The Greek name is a form of the Hebrew name *Johanan*, which means “*God is gracious.*” With both Elizabeth and Zechariah having insisted on the name John, there follows Zechariah’s inspired prophecy. His prayer of praise blesses God for his

mercy and for the prophetic mission of his child. God has visited and redeemed his people. He has saved them from their enemies, and has enabled them to serve him without fear. He is a God of tender mercy, and the child will go before the Lord to give the people knowledge of his salvation. John's life and mission would be, then, spent in witnessing to the graciousness, the kindness and the mercy of God. John points to the distinctive revelation that would soon be granted in the Person of Jesus Christ, the image of the unseen God — God, who is “*rich in mercy*” (Ephesians 2: 4). It is this which the Precursor will herald. For this reason, his name is “*God is gracious.*”

Ultimately, we are led to appreciate ever anew the graciousness and kindness of God our Father in sending his Son our Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit our Counsellor and Sanctifier. John bore witness to the revelation of the love of God made incarnate in Jesus Christ. Let us resolve to entrust ourselves in faith to this gracious love of God for us, and to bear witness to it in our daily life, just as John bore such magnificent witness to it in his life.

Second reflection: (Malachi 3:1-4, 23-24; Luke 1: 57-66)

Christmas and repentance As we approach the celebration of the birth of our Lord we are reminded by the Church of the birth of his divinely appointed herald and precursor, John the Baptist. Today the prophecy of Malachi predicting the coming of a messenger to prepare God's way is placed by the Church together with the gospel passage narrating the birth of John. John's birth is the fulfilment of this prophecy. He is the Elijah to come. John reminds us that we must prepare for the coming of the Redeemer. Part and parcel of the Christmas spirit is to prepare oneself spiritually. In a spirit of joyful expectation we must strive to repent. It is especially John, among the prophets, who symbolises the call to repent in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. We must repent if we are to benefit from the great blessing that is ours — the

Redeemer. In Christ, as St Paul says, we have received every heavenly blessing.

Let us mark this Christmas, as every Christmas, with a wholehearted welcoming of Christ, characterised by a joyful renunciation in our daily life of anything opposed to his way. The kingdom of God is at hand in the Person of Christ, so repent!



December 24 Morning Mass

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Gal 4: 4 Behold, when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son into the world.

Collect Come quickly, we pray, Lord Jesus, and do not delay, that those who trust in your compassion may find solace and relief in your coming. Who live and reign with God the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Samuel 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16;

Psalm 89:2-3, 4-5, 27 and 29; Luke 1:67-79

His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us- to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our

father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.
(Luke 1: 67-79)

Zechariah's prophecy It is agreed that Luke was a gentile convert, but he displays a great knowledge of Hebrew history, its Scriptures, and its story of salvation. Of course, he was a companion of St Paul — a master of the meaning of the Scriptures. One of the interesting features of the first chapter of Luke's Gospel is that a brief survey of this sacred history is presented as a prophecy. I refer to our Gospel of today. The Person of the Holy Spirit is introduced four times in the first chapter. The Angel

Gabriel tells Zechariah that his child will be filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb. Subsequently he announces to Mary that the Holy Spirit will come upon her. As a result her Child will be called the Son of God. The other two references to the Holy Spirit are the visitations of the Holy Spirit on Elizabeth and on Zechariah. When Mary arrives at the house of Zechariah, *“Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she spoke with a loud voice,”* praising the virgin Mary and her unborn Child. Then when John is born, Zechariah is filled with the Holy Spirit and he prophesied over his child. In fact, this is the only part of this chapter which Luke formally calls a “prophecy.” Zechariah “prophesied,” speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. His prophecy offers to the reader a survey of salvation history — as did the words of the Virgin Mary in response to Elizabeth’s blessing of praise. The prophecy of Zechariah gives us a glance back at what God had done to that point — a summary of the Scriptures, we might say — and a glance forward into what God would be doing in and through Zechariah’s child. It is a glimpse at the story

of redemption. God has “*visited and redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of David his servant.*” He has spoken by the prophets of our being saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. The promises of mercy, the “*holy covenant,*” and the “*oath he swore to our father Abraham,*” are all alluded to. We would be thus enabled to serve him without fear all our days. That was the promise, and the story of the people offered token upon token of its final fulfilment.

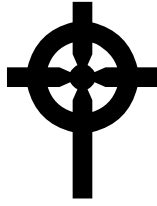
Then Zechariah’s prophecy reaches its climax, gazing into the future. John is declared to be a prophet of God. He will go before the Lord to prepare his way, and here the point becomes explicit. His mission will be to give “*knowledge of salvation to his people in freedom from their sins*” (1: 77). The past involved a revelation of the promises, the covenant, and the mercy of God in saving his people from their enemies. This “salvation” had a certain ambiguity about it — it involved political, social and economic liberation as well as liberation to serve God according to the worship he required. Yet it always looked

forward to a grander salvation to come. But now, Zechariah's prophecy explicitly mentions salvation from sin. In fact, it is the first time in the Gospel of St Luke that the "*forgiveness of sins*" is referred to. In the Gospel of St Matthew the Angel tells Joseph that he is to call the Child "*Jesus,*" for he will *save his people from their sins*. In the Gospel of St Luke, the prophecy of Zechariah foretells that John will go ahead of the Lord to give them a knowledge of the salvation from sin that is coming. This, then, is the climax of the prophecy, and it sets the stage for the next scene of the gospel, the birth of the Messiah at Bethlehem. Our Gospel today (Luke 1: 67-79) provides us with an inspired overview of the Old Testament and brings it to the very threshold of the New. Zechariah's prophecy could perhaps be regarded as of the order of the psalms — very many of the psalms look back on the saving action of God, and with that action in mind, look to him in hope. In the utterance of Zechariah, the past is surveyed, and a future full of hope is presented. The redeeming action of God in the past is about to attain a new height and depth, for now

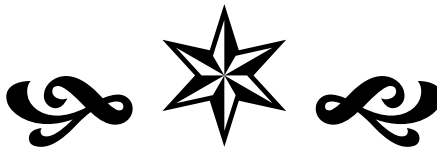
sin, the greatest of man's enemies, is to be confronted. John is the herald of the coming victory. "*All this is the work of the kindness of our God,*" Zechariah continues. He "*shall visit us in his mercy*" to light up the darkness of those in the shadow of death, and to bring us to peace.

I suggest that we read and re-read the prophecy of Zechariah, using it to contemplate what God had done in the past, and what he was about to do in the future. The entire Scriptures could be seen as encompassed in its rapid survey, and it connects the Old with the New. It is a song of praise and of thanksgiving, which looks with great hope on what is to come. As such it is timeless, and for that reason the Church uses it every day in her Morning Prayer of the Divine Office. Let us treasure this gift of the Holy Spirit, and allow it to nourish our appreciation of all that God has done and is doing for us.





The Season of Christmastide



The Nativity of the Lord (Christmas): Vigil Mass

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ex 16:6-7 Today you will know that the Lord will come, and he will save us, and in the morning you will see his glory.

Collect O God, who gladden us year by year as we wait in hope for our redemption, grant that, just as we joyfully welcome your Only Begotten Son as our Redeemer, we may also merit to face him confidently when he comes again as our Judge. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 62: 1-5; Psalm 88; Acts 13: 16-17.22-25; Matthew 1: 1-25

“The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac; and Isaac was the father of Jacob; and Jacob was the father of Judas and his brethren; And Judas was the father of Phares and Zara of Thamar; and Phares was the father of Esrom; and Esrom was the father of Aram; And

Aram was the father of Aminadab; and Aminadab was the father of Naasson; and Naasson was the father of Salmon; And Salmon was the father of Booz of Rachab; and Booz was the father of Obed of Ruth; and Obed was the father of Jesse; And Jesse was the father of David the king; and David the king was the father of Solomon of her that had been the wife of Urias; and Solomon was the father of Roboam; and Roboam was the father of Abia; and Abia was the father of Asa; and Asa was the father of Josaphat; and Josaphat was the father of Joram; and Joram was the father of Ozias; And Ozias was the father of Joatham; and Joatham was the father of Achaz; and Achaz was the father of Ezekias; And Ezekias was the father of Manasses; and Manasses was the father of Amon; and Amon was the father of Josias; And Josias b was the father of Jechonias and his brethren, about the time they were carried away to Babylon: And after they were brought to Babylon, Jechonias was the father of Salathiel; and Salathiel was the father of Zorobabel; And Zorobabel was the father of Abiud; and Abiud was the father of Eliakim; and Eliakim;

was the father of Azor; And Azor was the father of Sadoc; and Sadoc was the father of Achim; and Achim b was the father of Eliud; And Eliud was the father of Eleazar; and Eleazar was the father of Matthan; and Matthan was the father of Jacob; And Jacob was the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ. So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David until the carrying away into Babylon are fourteen generations; and from the carrying away into Babylon to Christ are fourteen generations.

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way: When as His mother was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to put her to shame, was minded to put her away privately. But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying Joseph, son of David, fear not to take Mary as your wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And

she shall bring forth a son, and you shall call His name JESUS: for He shall save His people from their sins. Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call His name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us. Then Joseph woke and did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: And he knew her not before she gave birth to her firstborn son: and he called his name Jesus.” (Matthew 1: 1-25)

Son of Man The idea of someone being a “son of God” was not at all new in the ancient world. Indeed, various famous personages had aspired to the title as part of their possession of power and position. The title “Son of Heaven” (child of sky/heaven/god) was used, it seems, in the Western Zhou dynasty (c. 1000 B.C., in China). The Zhou belief held that as Son of Heaven (i.e., sky or god), the Emperor of China was responsible for the well-being of the whole world. Jimmu Tenno, the first Emperor of Japan (perhaps c. 600 BC) was also called the Son of

Heaven. One of the most spectacular careers of the ancient world was, of course, that of the Macedonian Alexander. His extraordinary military achievements at such a young age, together with his sense of destiny and the flattery of many, gave him delusions of grandeur and a great desire to master the world. He died before getting to his planned campaign of Arabia, and we read in his “Last Plans” that he had designs on the “Carthaginians and the other inhabitants of the coastal area of Africa, Iberia and the neighbouring coasts as far as Sicily”. They would not have stood a chance against Alexander. The inspired author of 1 Maccabees tells us that “*he advanced to the ends of the earth, and plundered many nations. When the earth became quiet before him, he was exalted, and his heart was lifted up*” (1:3). Indeed! It seems that he got to the point of seeking to be regarded as a deity. The oracle at Siwa confirmed to him that he was a son of Zeus — and he began to identify himself as the son of Zeus-Ammon, which may suggest he had come to regard himself as a demi-god. It is said that his old teacher and fellow

Macedonian, the great Aristotle, was scarcely impressed when news of this reached him. Alexander was not the only ruler to aspire to such transcendent status. After his assassination, in 42 BC Julius Caesar was formally deified with the title “divus Iulius” — not the word “deus”. He was not installed as one of the perpetual gods, but one who had become god-like — although the distinction was probably lost on the populace of the empire. Augustus called himself “divi filius” and by the end of the first century the emperor Domitian was being called “dominus et deus” — master and god. Emperors began to be worshipped, which suited them perfectly.

We remember that when Pilate, perceiving Christ’s innocence and the jealousy of his accusers, was told by “*the Jews*” that Jesus had “*made himself the Son of God .. he was the more afraid; (and) said to Jesus, ‘Where are you from?’*” (John 19:7-8). He may have been getting scared at what he was getting into, with the plainly just and innocent One standing sovereignly before him. But self-interest won the day. All of this brings us to our Gospel

passage today (Matthew 1: 1-25) as we enter the Christmas season. Mention was made of Pilate — he was in the presence of One who was self-evidently a Man. He was fully human, but not only human. The Christian testimony as given in the Gospels is unambiguous: Jesus Christ is of the house of David, a descendant of Abraham, and indeed is a child of Adam as we all are. The young and battered Alexander, at the top of his earthly pinnacle and with ambitions for future conquests undimmed, had presented himself as a demi-god. He was not now a mere “son of man”, but the son of Ammon-Zeus. Jesus Christ, a child of the Hebrews, referred to himself constantly as “the Son of Man”, alluding to his full humanity (e.g., Ezekiel 15:1) and to his Messianic identity (Daniel 7). But in this “Son of Man”, the world did not have one who had gained a divine standing by decree, like, many supposed, the greats of this world. Rather, here there was One who, from all eternity and in his own distinct Person, had been with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, as the same one and only God. *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word*

was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1: 1). But then, *“the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth”* (1:14). He, God the Son, had become man while, of course, remaining God. It was a mind-blowing proposition and it absolutely upset the apple-cart on all sides. The “*Jews*” (of St John’s Gospel) would not have it, nor would the Empire in due course. So, it was now revealed, there is one only God, and that one true God is three divine Persons. The Second Person became thoroughly Man (but without sin), a descendant of Adam and Abraham and David, and born of a woman. He redeemed the world from sin by his atoning Death and his Resurrection, and poured out the Holy Spirit by means of his Church, in fulfilment of the prophecies. Our Gospel today presents to us the full humanity of this adorable divine Person.

Christmas day offers us the opportunity, in contemplating his birth at Bethlehem, to think of the wonder of the Incarnation of the Son of God. How miserable are the pretensions of the divine Caesars before

the awesome spectacle of the Son of God born in the manger and crucified on the Cross! What power this displays! All things are possible to God, and the proof of it is before us. God can even become man. He can even die a human death, and can save the world from its hopeless condition of sin by his obedience and take us through love and grace to holiness in him. Let us rejoice in the Incarnation and in the fulfilment of God's saving plan as presented in the holy Scriptures.



The Nativity of the Lord (Christmas): Mass during the Night

Entrance Antiphon Ps 2: 7 The Lord said to me: You are my Son. It is I who have begotten you this day.

Or:

Let us all rejoice in the Lord, for our Savior has been born in the world. Today true peace has come down to us from heaven.

Collect O God, who have made this most sacred night radiant with the splendour of the true light, grant, we pray, that we, who have known the mysteries of his light on earth, may also delight in his gladness in heaven. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture readings for Night Mass: Isaiah 9:1-6; Psalm 95;
Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, his betrothed, who was expecting her child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby

wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests. (Luke 2: 1-14)

Christian poverty It is a great joy when a child is born to a young couple, especially, perhaps, their first-born. I have a cup that has been handed down over more than a century and a half. On it is engraved the name and birthday of the first child of a young couple who married early in 1859 in England. It is clear that the birth of their son was a wonderful event in their lives. They went on to have many more children, and, sadly, that first-born son died at the age of thirty-two. Whenever a child is born to a royal couple, it is a cause of national celebration. When Frederik, the Crown Prince of Denmark met and married Mary Donaldson of Australia, it was portrayed as a modern fairy-tale romance. On 15 October 2005, Mary gave birth to Prince Christian Valdemar Henri John. The event was splashed across the world in all the

media. Then on 21 April 2007, Princess Isabella Henrietta Ingrid Margrethe was born to them. Such events are typical moments of great rejoicing. Over two thousand years ago, heaven itself erupted with rejoicing over a birth that scarcely anyone else in the world was aware of, that of Jesus, son of Mary, and whose foster-father was Joseph, Mary's husband. As our Gospel passage for midnight of Christmas describes, out in the hills of Bethlehem there were shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and the glory of the Lord shone around them. While no messages sped across the Empire from courier to courier, Heaven did not restrain itself from telling someone. But did the Angel announce it to the courts, or to the Roman Senate? No — it was told to unknown shepherds in the hills of Bethlehem. *“Do not be afraid,”* the Angel said to them. *“I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”*

The Saviour of the world had been born, but what was especially notable was that he was born in poverty and obscurity. It is this which God chose and preferred for his divine Son, rather than fame and riches.

It is a good and wholesome thing to be loved, and to have the esteem of others. Indeed, if a person is not loved, and if he does not have the esteem of others, it may well be due to serious fault on his part — though not necessarily so. It is also a good and wholesome thing to possess certain of the goods of this world, and if a person is making little effort to possess at least what he needs, then this too may well be due to serious fault on his part. Generally speaking, God intends that we enjoy the regard of our fellow-man, and he wants us to have the material possessions that we need. He implants in us the natural desire for these things. But our fallen nature inclines us to desire them to excess, and to prefer them above all else. Fame and wealth can gratify our self-love and can feed the desire to place self at the centre of our world. So much of the history of mankind has been consumed with the desire

for wealth, power and notoriety. The Caesars were driven by it, as was Alexander and those who followed him in governing his divided empire. The kings and emperors of this world, the barons of business and the heroes of various exploits, attain fame and wealth. Life is regarded as successful if elements of these things are attained. Accordingly, a young person sets out in life and if he “makes it to the top,” gaining power in his field, or social acclaim, or much wealth — and who would not regard him as being in an enviable position? He has been “successful.” What would such persons, or the world at large, think of an individual who is born in utter obscurity, who passes his years with but modest possessions, and who finishes his life being reviled and executed? But this was the course of Jesus Christ. It went clean against what the world regards as in any sense acceptable. As St Paul writes, Jesus Christ was rich, but he made himself poor — and he did this in order that we might be made rich. This choice by God of poverty, not only in material possessions but in the other goods which the world esteems, such as fame and power, is

most instructive. On Christmas day, let us contemplate long and frequently, the poverty of the King of kings, born in Bethlehem.

It is the greatest of graces to desire to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, for love of him. *If anyone wishes to be my disciple*, our Lord said, *let him take up his cross every day and follow in my footsteps*. Let us observe that from the outset, from his very birth, the Son of God chose the path of poverty. Somehow and in some real sense, the disciple of Christ will want to follow Jesus Christ in his poverty. Let us pray to the Holy Spirit, to Mary and to Joseph, asking for the grace to do this, and for the wisdom to see what it involves in our particular situation and vocation.



The Nativity of the Lord (Christmas): Mass at Dawn

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Is 9:1, 5; Lk 1:33 Today a light will shine upon us, for the Lord is born for us; and he will be called Wondrous God, Prince of peace, Father of future ages: and his reign will be without end.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that, as we are bathed in the new radiance of your incarnate Word, the light of faith, which illumines our minds, may also shine through in our deeds. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture for Dawn Mass: Isaiah 62:11-12; Psalm 97:1, 6, 11-12; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:15-20

When the angels went away from them to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go, then, to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger.

When they saw this, they made known the message that had been told them about this child. All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds. And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them. (Luke 2:15-20)

The new beginning There have often been reports of a moral shift in society — indeed, of a moral decline. For instance, years ago (December 22, 2004) there appeared an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (by Chris McGillion, p.13) which reported the findings of a research Institute of Ethics in California, USA. This Institute had been monitoring the moral attitudes of American high school students for more than 20 years. It found that the number of students admitting to cheating, stealing and lying had climbed significantly during that period. That related merely to a population of students — without touching the moral attitudes of society at large. But so it is that many who discount education in religion

have called for a greater emphasis on education in moral values. Sadly, many deny religion, but few would deny the importance of ethics. Ethics, for example, is a central interest in much of investigative reporting. All admit that ethics is central to family life, the school, the workplace, business, politics, recreation, wherever man acts in society. The challenge, of course, lies in determining a correct ethical system. The danger in the modern era lies in reducing ethics to the useful, and in dismissing religion, including Revealed Religion, as being unnecessary for an ethical life. It is one thing to have the intellectual capacity to develop an ethical system, and even to have a good education in ethical behaviour. It is quite another to have the character and the virtue to live up to it. A child who reaches the age of reason knows by then many things that are right and wrong. He has been helped by the education in moral values given to him by his parents and hopefully by his teachers. But he has to have the qualities of character, which is to say, sufficient virtue, even to *know* and judge what is right, then to *choose to do* it, and then to

persevere virtuously in that choice. The one without this moral character or virtue may know (at least vaguely) what is right but will not act accordingly. Further, our conscience tells us that, beyond knowing and doing right actions, we ought seek to be good in our inmost selves. We are called to be good, in the core of our being.

That is to say, we are called to do the right thing for the right motive, the right motive ultimately being the love of God. But God has revealed that we are born into a morally wounded condition, which makes it impossible for us, of our own powers, to achieve the full moral goodness to which we are called. Further, we are called — and our conscience intimates it to us — to communion with our Maker. That is to say, a proper ethic will ultimately include religion. Religion itself is part of the good life which our conscience recognizes as required of us, and as necessary for our full humanity. But St Paul tells us that of ourselves we are under the power of sin. We cannot reach the goals we know we are called to attain, which is inner moral goodness and communion with God. This is

something greater than simply “doing the right thing,” because we can “do the right thing” for the wrong motives. A person can be bad in intent, while doing what appears to be good. This is why God sent his Son to become man, to be born in a stable at Bethlehem, to grow up, to suffer, die and to rise again. He did this in order to enable us not only to do what is right, but to be good, good with a share in his own goodness, holy with a share in his own holiness. He did all this to enable us to become God’s children, living with his own life now and in the life hereafter. By our baptism we have been granted a share in his own divine life, and with that share in his life we have been given the spark of divine goodness that we must fan into a flame, so that it completely fills our being, overcoming sin and transforming us into the image of Jesus. Christ is the image of the Father, and we are called to be transformed into the image of Christ, not just in respect to our actions, but at the level of our inmost mind and heart. Christmas offers us the opportunity to welcome Christ as the Lord of every aspect of our lives. Let us ask him to lead us on to

genuine goodness and holiness of life, in his likeness. Let us look to Mary as the perfect Christian, the Mother of our Redeemer who was utterly filled with grace and goodness. She points to what we should be striving for — goodness and holiness of mind, heart and soul through the loving fulfilment of God's will.

We have to aim at this daily. We must strive to be consistently holy. This is a long and hard battle, the struggle of a lifetime, and every day counts. Let us take up that challenge, striving with the holy family of Bethlehem, Jesus, Mary and Joseph as our daily model. Christmas day constitutes the opportunity of a new beginning, not only in respect to a new year, but a new beginning in our religious and moral life. Christ is our model and our means. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Let us receive him into our hearts, resolving to follow generously in his footsteps.



The Nativity of the Lord (Christmas): Mass during the Day

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Is 9:5 A child is born for us, and a son is given to us; his scepter of power rests upon his shoulder, and his name will be called Messenger of great counsel.

Collect O God, who wonderfully created the dignity of human nature and still more wonderfully restored it, grant, we pray, that we may share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 97;
Hebrews 1:1-6; John 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life,

and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the power to become children of God—children born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth. (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, “This is the one I spoke about when I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me.’”) Out of his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the

law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known. (John 1: 1-18)

The Word *Logos* (λόγος word, from λέγω “I say”) was, it seems, originally a word with a range of meanings: a plea, an opinion, an expectation, word, speech, account, reason. Quite early it became a philosophical term, perhaps beginning with Heraclitus (535–475 BC), who used it for a principle of order and knowledge — and he seems to suggest that there is an independent universal *logos*. The ancient sophists used the term to mean discourse. Aristotle, in his *Ars Rhetorica*, gave *logos* the meaning of an argument from reason, one of the three modes of persuasion. In Stoic philosophy, which began with Zeno of Citium c. 300 BC, broadly speaking the *logos* was the reason that animated the universe. It was imagined as material, and was God or Nature — without, it seems, transcending the universe. The Stoics also referred to the principle of the active reason working in inanimate

matter. Humans, too, each possess a portion of the divine *logos*. All activity implied a *logos*, which was the operative principle of the world, its soul — the *anima mundi*. Philo of Alexandria (20 BC – 50 AD), a contemporary of Jesus Christ and a Hellenized Jew, took his own approach. He followed Plato’s distinction between (imperfect) matter and (the perfect) idea, and decided that intermediary beings were necessary to bridge the enormous gap between God and the material world. The *Logos* was the highest of these intermediary beings, and “is the bond of everything, holding all things together and binding all the parts”. I mention all this simply to show that the λόγος was a familiar expression in Hellenistic thought, and influential too (as illustrated in Philo). Another example of a common Greek (and Stoic) term that appears in the New Testament was that for “conscience” — taken over by St Paul in his writings and used in his inspired teaching. So important was St Paul’s use of this term that as a result he became perhaps the most important classical influence on the Western notion of “conscience.” But it had its roots not

primarily in Old Testament terminology but in Hellenistic. Now, the idea of the *logos* was similarly widely used in Greek thought, as has just been illustrated. All of this brings us to our Gospel passage for Christmas day (John 1: 1-18). In this striking piece, we are told by St John that “*the λόγος became flesh and dwelt among us.*”

So then, the *Logos* was a term quite familiar to the era of John the Evangelist. Manifestly, though, the “beloved disciple” was not telling his Hellenic readership and converts that what they had heard of a *Logos*, in its various meanings within various currents of Greek thought, was what Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Saviour of the world, was. John, with decades of bearing witness to Jesus Christ in the Gentile and Jewish world behind him, was taking a term, powerful and well-known to Jews and Gentiles, and was using it to express the ineffable Person he had known and knew so well. The Greek word (λόγος) had its strengths provided it was purified and explained, especially as referring to the foundational Principle of the world. But John came at it, and came at his Gospel, as a

son of Abraham and steeped in Revealed Religion and the Holy Scriptures. This surpassing Revelation and these most sacred Writings were also pervaded by the notion of “word” or “speech” — which was one of the various meanings of *logos*. In fact, everything depended on God having intervened in history to declare his “word.” The very world came from his word, as the first sentences of the Book of Genesis make clear: “*And God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light*” (1:3). Everything of worth begins with God and his word, and it is for man to obey it. Abraham enters history only because God spoke his word to him, and he obeyed it. On this does Revealed Religion depend, and because of this the blessings of God come to man. At the beginning, the Serpent denied all this. The woman told him that “*God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree’ But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God’*” (Genesis 3: 3-5). So God’s word is false and is to be rejected — and this lie was accepted. Jesus Christ, the new

Adam, put the true situation very clearly when Satan approached him: “*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God*” (Matthew 3: 4). This is the basis of Revealed Religion. What John the Evangelist did was, by inspired insight, to see in Jesus Christ the word of God that pervaded the Holy Scriptures. He is the Word of God, that word by which God created the world, spoke to his people, and both promised and fulfilled his Salvation.

That Word, the Son of the Father, is the true *Logos*, and it is divine Revelation which answers the question as to its true nature. The Greek world, in all its talk of the *logos*, while usually wide of the mark had attained useful insights. The true *Logos*, though, was of surpassing character and identity beyond all imagining. There is one only God, and this one divine and infinite Being is three divine Persons from all eternity. The Second divine Person, the λόγος of the Father, became flesh, and “*we have beheld his glory*”. It is he, the *Logos*, who reveals God and achieves his plan. “*No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the*

bosom of the Father, he has made him known.” As we celebrate his birth at Bethlehem, let us rejoice in his love for us.



Fifth day in the Octave of Christmas

Entrance Antiphon Jn 3: 16 God so loved the world that he gave his Only Begotten Son, so that all who believe in him may not perish, but may have eternal life.

Collect Almighty and invisible God, who dispersed the darkness of this world by the coming of your light, look, we pray, with serene countenance upon us, that we may acclaim with fitting praise the greatness of the Nativity of your Only Begotten Son. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 2:3-11; Psalm 96:1-3, 5b-6;

Luke 2:22-35

When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: a pair of doves or two young

pigeons. Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel. The child's father and mother marvelled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too. (Luke 2:22-35)

Holy Spirit An especially striking feature of the inspired writings of St Luke is his interest in and mention of the Holy Spirit. In both his Gospel and in his Acts of the Apostles, the Holy Spirit has as his formal title “the Holy Spirit”, and he acts decisively as a divine Person. It suggests not only that Luke is profoundly aware of the formal teaching of the early Church on the Third Divine Person and wishes to instil it, but that he knows the Holy Spirit and his action from personal experience. The first chapter of his Gospel narrates the mention of the Holy Spirit by the Angel Gabriel to both Zechariah and Mary, and his action in inspiring both Elizabeth and Zechariah to prophesy. Four times the Holy Spirit is referred to in this opening chapter. In the second chapter, the Holy Spirit is the decisive Agent in the intervention of Simeon. In the third chapter it is announced by John the Baptist that the Messiah, about to appear, will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Then the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus in the form of a dove. In the fourth chapter he fills the soul of Jesus Christ and leads him into the wilderness for an

immediate confrontation with Satan, after which Jesus returns “*in the power of the Spirit*” to Galilee. Back in Nazareth, our Lord cites the prophecy of Isaiah in which “*the Spirit of the Lord is upon me,*” and applies it to himself. It seems especially at the beginning of our Lord’s life, and then at the beginning of his public ministry, that Luke takes pains to record the Person and the action of the Holy Spirit. There are of course specific references to the Holy Spirit during his public ministry, but it is our Lord himself who is the prominent Actor then. Having risen from the dead, Christ informs his disciples (Luke 24: 49) that he will send to them “*the promise of my Father*” — and they are to await it in the City, till “*you are clothed with power from on high.*” In the Acts of the Apostles, the Holy Spirit will take over. In our Gospel today, which is part of the narrative of Christ’s infancy, the Holy Spirit intervenes as he did with Zechariah and Elizabeth, causing them to prophesy. Here, he leads the holy Simeon to the Messiah, enables him to recognize and gaze upon him, and then to utter a prophecy over him.

In our scene today, the Holy Spirit himself is bearing witness to Jesus by leading Simeon to him. He then empowers Simeon to bear witness to him before his holy parents. All of the actors in our scene are profoundly docile to the action of the Spirit of God. It is a magnificent coming together of the very cream of the Old Testament. We may take it that never in the Old Testament had there been such a sparkling constellation of the highest reach as in this small group. There was in that humble meeting, Simeon, a man led by the Holy Spirit, taught by the Holy Spirit, and blessed by the Holy Spirit with the sight of the One who was the *raison d'être* of God's choice of Israel. There was holy Mary, peerless in sanctity, accompanied by her holy spouse, Joseph. No-one, past or present or future, would equal them in grace and fidelity — with Mary surpassing all, and her husband second after her. Soon to join them was Anna the prophetess. But above all, in their midst was the divine Child, God the Son become man. He was the very source of the sanctity in which they all shared. Now, this astounding though hidden sanctity was the work

and life of the Holy Spirit. Their coming together, too, was his work. May we not see in their coming together an act of triumphant joy in what he, the third divine Person, had so gloriously done? Mary was the new Eve, and her divine Child was the new Adam. A new beginning had been made, and it was the work of the Spirit. A new creation had begun, a new Covenant would soon be established, a new and most glorious prospect lay ahead. Near to them were the best of saints. Then Simeon approaches, takes the Child into his arms, and acts as prophet of the Most High. The Spirit of God is upon him, and he announces the word of God about the Child. The Child is the salvation God offers, a light to the Gentiles and the glory of God's people. But — and this is surely the burden of the Spirit's activity in this Gospel scene — he must and will suffer, as will those closely associated with him. He is, Simeon says to Mary, *“a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too”* (Luke 2: 22-35).

Let us cultivate a deep devotion to the Holy Spirit. Let us ask him to reveal the Person of Jesus Christ to us, just as he did to Simeon. Let us ask him to help us enter into the life and mission of Jesus Christ, and especially to accept for love of him the path of suffering for his sake which is, mysteriously, so necessary in the plan of God. The Holy Spirit is our Advocate, our Consoler, our Counsellor, our Teacher. He is the one who, by his grace, transforms us into the image of Jesus Christ. Let us love the Holy Spirit, then, and never — as St Paul warns in one of his Letters — make him sad.

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Second reflection: St Thomas a Becket (Optional Memorial for 29th December)

Collect: O God, who gave the Martyr Saint Thomas Becket the courage to give up his life for the sake of justice, grant, through his intercession, that, renouncing our life for the sake of Christ in this world, we may find it in heaven. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who

lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Timothy 2:8-15.3:10-12; Psalm 33;

Matthew 16:24-27

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done. (Matthew 16:24-27)

Resisting the world St Thomas a Becket spent his ecclesiastical life largely resisting undue influence and control of the Church by the English monarch. It was a matter of battling to preserve the lordship of Christ over his Church and the preservation of his plan for the Church. There are many ways the Church can be held in bondage to

society and to the world. It can come through control by the state, as in Henry II's time and later in Henry VIII's time. But there are other ways, such as the dominion of public opinion and the values of the world. We must be alert to this ever present danger, and be prepared to resist it at great cost — the cost of rejection by others who see the influence of the world as very reasonable.

We must always be renewing our choice for Christ and his plan, and resisting whatever is against it. St Thomas a Becket made this choice and kept to it to the point of martyrdom. He saw, too, that essential to Christ's plan for the Church was constant recognition of the universal jurisdiction and authority of the successor of St Peter. Resistance to the influence of the world in the Church goes hand in hand with this recognition of and love for Christ's vicar on earth. Many in the course of English history laid down their lives for this doctrine of the faith. Let us hold to that choice, and help others to hold to it.



Sixth Day in the Octave of Christmas

Entrance Antiphon Wisdom 18:14-15 When a profound silence covered all things and night was in the middle of its course, your all-powerful Word, O Lord, bounded from heaven's royal throne.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that the newness of the Nativity in the flesh of your Only Begotten Son may set us free, for ancient servitude holds us bound beneath the yoke of sin. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 2:12-17; Psalm 96:7-8a, 8b-10;
Luke 2:36-40

There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty four. She never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and

praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.
(Luke 2:36-40)

Anna It is intriguing to notice Luke's almost casual way of introducing Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, as a "prophetess." Luke gives us a detail of fact: her father was Phanuel, and Phanuel was of the tribe of Asher. There is no mention of her mother, as the important link in terms of her tribe was her father, just as Jesus Christ was of the tribe of Judah, counted as such because of Joseph his foster-father. We know nothing of Phanuel other than his mention by Luke, so where did Luke obtain his information? Presumably it derived from Mary, the mother of Jesus, as would most of his infancy narrative. That said, Anna was a "prophetess." The Hebrew prophet was not

merely, as the word commonly implies, a man enlightened by God to foretell events; he was the interpreter and supernaturally enlightened herald sent by Yahweh to communicate His will and designs to Israel. His mission consisted in announcing God's word, whether this amounted to preaching or, occasionally, foretelling. The great majority of "prophets" whose declarations are preserved in the Scriptures were men, but there are records of a few prophets who were women. For instance, Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, was a prophetess. After the crossing of the Red Sea, she led the women in the refrain, *"Sing to the Lord, for he is gloriously triumphant; horse and chariot he has cast into the sea"* (Exodus 15: 20-21). Deborah was a prophetess in the time of the Judges. We read that *"Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappodoth, was judging Israel at that time... and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment"* (Judges 4: 4-5). There is another mention of a prophetess, in the time of the reign of the good king Josiah of Jerusalem. When the book of the Law was found in the temple, Josiah asked Hilkiah the

priest and others to consult the Lord what to do. We read that Hilkiah “*went to Huldah the prophetess, the wife of Shallum the son of Tikvah, the son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe; now she dwelt in Jerusalem in the (suburb known as) Second Quarter; and they talked with her*” (2 Kings 22:14). In reply, she announced the word of the Lord to them.

In fact, each of these references in the Old Testament seem to imply that there were other prophetesses in the history of the people, just as there were probably many more (at least minor) prophets than those whose writings and declarations are included in the sacred books. Luke’s mention of Anna being a prophetess is almost a casual mention — as if not a unique phenomenon. Let it be remembered too that not all those who went as “prophets” were saintly people. In the book of Nehemiah (6:12 14), “*Nboadiah the prophetess and the other prophets*” opposed Nehemiah at the time of the return to Jerusalem. In the Book of Revelation (2:18-21), there is a condemnation of “*that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess.*” The

point I am making is that Anna was one of those many in the history of God's people who were used by God to make his will known — at times on a very small scale, at times on the large scene of the nation as with, say Elijah and Jeremiah in the Old Testament, and John the Baptist in the New. Anna was one of the minor prophets who would never have been known to history were she not recorded as being led to witness the entry of the Child Jesus into the Temple. She gave thanks, and then spoke *“about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.”* Much more important than her being a prophet, though, was her saintly life. We are reminded of that occasion in our Lord's public ministry when a woman from the crowd raised her voice in praise of him: *“Blessed is the one who bore you,”* she called out — blessed is the one who had you for her son! But our Lord replied, *“Blessed rather is the one who hears the word of God and puts it into practice”* (Luke 11: 28). Anna was a prophetess, with gifts of the Holy Spirit, and a calling to serve the people of God within her sphere of life and

activity, but her greatest glory was her fidelity to the will of God over a long life. She “*never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying.*” She led a magnificent life of worship, fasting and prayer, and as a prophetess served as a fit instrument of the Holy Spirit in revealing the will of God to others. It is a cause of joy that Luke saw fit to record her life and her intervention in his inspired account of Jesus Christ.

As we celebrate the coming of Jesus Christ, let us make our own the holy joy that filled the soul of Anna the prophetess, who lived for God night and day in the Temple. Let us place ourselves in the midst of the circle that gathered on this occasion in the Temple — Mary, Joseph, Simeon, Anna, with the Child of the ages in their midst. All were gazing on him in wonder and love, for from him would come the redemption of the world. Let us give thanks and let us resolve to live a good and holy life in imitation of him, made possible by his grace.



Second reflection: (Luke 2:36-40)

The prophetess Anna In today's Gospel the Church places before us the grand and beautiful figure of the prophetess Anna. The account comes from Luke, who presumably received it from our Lady. As a prophetess, Anna would have, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, on occasion told to others what God wanted them to hear. Her life had been filled with the love and service of God, living in the Temple a life of constant prayer and penance. Constantly open in mind and heart to the will of God, she was led instantly to recognise in the Son of Mary the One who was the Messiah. She thus exemplifies the point that the one who lives faithful to the grace given will be disposed to recognise and respond to further grace. Let us observe too that, praising God for the arrival of the Messiah, she spoke of him to all who looked forward to the coming redemption. She was, through her prayer and penance, able to be a true witness and influence. She could

Speak of the Child because she had been faithful to grace and generous with God.

Let us take our cue from Anna and make God the object of our entire life, with prayer, penance and apostolic activity as the distinguishing characteristics of our Christian life. Anna was one of the Lord's very first disciples, becoming one soon after his birth. Let us learn from her, and learn from the two other protagonists who loom far larger in the scene — Mary our Mother and Joseph our father.



Seventh Day in the Octave of Christmas

Entrance Antiphon Is 9: 5 A child is born for us, and a son is given to us; his sceptre of power rests upon his shoulder, and his name will be called Messenger of great counsel.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who in the Nativity of your Son established the beginning and fulfilment of all religion, grant, we pray, that we may be numbered among those who belong to him, in whom is the fullness of human salvation. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 2:18-21; Psalm 96:1-2, 11-13;

John 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God — children born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the Only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus

Christ. No one has ever seen God, but God the Only Begotten, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.
(John 1: 1-18)

Word made flesh It is, of course, very difficult if not impossible to sum up the religious world of classical times, which is to say the time of the appearance of the Christian religion. There was the popular and official religion of Greece and Rome, with its vast array of gods and goddesses. In the Greek world, for instance, there was the typical hierarchy of deities, with Zeus, the king of the gods, having a certain level of control over the others. Some deities had dominion over certain aspects of nature. Zeus was the sky god, sending thunder and lightning, Poseidon ruled over the sea and earthquakes, Hades exercised his power throughout the realm of death and the Underworld, and Helios controlled the sun. Other deities ruled over a facet of life — for instance, Aphrodite controlled love. The gods acted like humans, and had human vices. At times certain gods would be opposed to others, and they would try to outdo each other. It was a

human scene enlarged and acted out on an imagined other-worldly stage. Those who were not satisfied by the public cult of the gods could turn to various mystery religions which operated as cults into which members had to be initiated in order to learn their secrets. All the while, several notable philosophers criticised the prevailing beliefs, although it is difficult to sum up the position of Greek philosophy on religion. Xenophanes opposed the vices of the gods as well as their human-like depiction. So different was Socrates' view from that of the state that, in 399 BC, he found himself before a jury of 500 of his fellow Athenians accused of refusing to acknowledge the gods recognized by the state, and of corrupting the youth. He was condemned to death, and dutifully executed himself by drinking the prescribed hemlock. His disciple Plato seems to have believed in what he called the Form of the good, and which he believed was the emanation of perfection in the universe. Plato's disciple, Aristotle, also discounted polytheism, because he could not find evidence for it. He proposed the Prime Mover which had set creation going,

but was scarcely interested in the universe. Many other examples could be given of the polytheism of the peoples of classical times.

How different is the grand beginning of the Gospel of St John, which is the passage for the end of the Octave of Christmas, the last day of the civil year. It is set at a height and a depth without parallel in the religion of the ancient world. At the same time it is presented as plain and hard fact — in this sense, the most down-to-earth of statements. Plato and Aristotle attained exceedingly valuable abstractions, mixed with errors, and these abstractions would be used by the greatest intellects of the Christian religion. But here we have simple statements presenting plain facts that revealed the life of the ineffable God. In the beginning was the Word — that same Word that had been uttered by God in the beginning, and due to which all things that exist were made. The Book of Genesis speaks of God and his word: “*And God said...*”. John informs us here that this word was with God in the beginning, and in fact was God. The word of God was the Word, with a

capital “W.” He was a Person, and was with God in the beginning, and was God. Whoever heard of this? It is a remarkable doctrine, and were it not proved to be true by the Person and life of Jesus Christ, its remarkable character would itself be cause for intense interest and reflection. It is unique among the religions of man. Further, this divine Word *became man and dwelt among us*. He is the light of the world and of every man in it. Whatever be the value of the work of the philosophers, it cannot compare with the light available to the world in the Person of Jesus Christ, the Word of God become flesh. His was the glory, and that glory was seen by those who knew him and were his friends. “*We have seen his glory,*” John writes, “*the glory of the Only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.*” It is seen by those who come to know, love and follow him. Those who do not know him will not see his glory except at the end when he comes again on the clouds, accompanied by the Angels. Indeed, it is very likely that many will reject and persecute him — as did Paul before he was confronted by the glorified Jesus, who said to him,

“Saul, why do you persecute me?” Let us appreciate anew the wonder of Jesus Christ and his revelation!

Let us take our stand on what God has revealed. The countless religions of man deserve the respect that man deserves. They represent his yearning for the Beyond. But we have been granted a wondrous revelation by God. We know the true and only God, that he is one in being and nature, yet three in Persons. The Father has sent his Son as our Redeemer, and, this work of redemption done, Father and Son have sent the Spirit to his Church to be our Sanctifier. Let us embrace anew all that God has revealed, and do our best to bring it to the world.

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Second reflection: (John 1:1-18)

Reverence for the Word of God There is an old saying that familiarity breeds contempt. When one has constant and familiar contact with something of great value, there is a danger of losing respect for it. In the

sacraments Christ himself acts on us and for us, most obviously in the holy Eucharist, which is Christ himself, giving himself to us. All too often we disregard and neglect our Lord's real presence in the Eucharist, and make little effort to preserve a lively conviction of this presence. In the opening passage of St John's Gospel, commonly called the Prologue (1: 1-18), in simple yet austere terms our Lord's grandeur is presented. He is the Word of God. From all eternity he was with God. He was and is God, while being other in Person from the Father. Everything came to be through him. He became flesh in order that those who accepted him might become children of God.

Let us ever contemplate these simple truths from St John's opening lines, so that our reverence and appreciation of the Person of Jesus will grow constantly. Let us never take him for granted, and by our witness let us ensure that the world does not take him for granted.



Second Sunday after Christmas

Entrance Antiphon Wisdom 18:14-15 When a profound silence covered all things and night was in the middle of its course, your all-powerful Word, O Lord, bounded from heaven's royal throne.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, splendour of faithful souls, graciously be pleased to fill the world with your glory, and show yourself to all peoples by the radiance of your light. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ecclesiasticus 24:1-4.12-16; Psalm 147;
Ephesians 1:3-6.15-18; John 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines

in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God—children born not blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, “This is the one I spoke about when I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’”) Out of his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came

through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known. (John 1: 1-18)

Christ the Revelation of God I remember when I was beginning my studies of theology and Scripture (a long time ago!), I somehow picked up the notion that John the Evangelist had, in view of the evidence of the Prologue of his Gospel (the *Logos*, etc.), manifestly been profoundly influenced by Hellenic currents of thought. But no. In the first instance, John was profoundly influenced by Jesus himself and the inspired Hebrew Scriptures, so markedly focused as they were on the *word* of the living God. By God's word must man live: "*Man does not live by bread alone, but by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord*" (Deuteronomy 8:3). That word was addressed repeatedly to his chosen people. The Greek *Logos* provided a very useful *common ground* which the profoundly Jewish John seized upon and plumbed in the light of God's word as definitively given, expressed and illuminated by Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the Word of

God, and the true *Logos*. But to assert this apostolic approach by John is not to deny that God was active in the *world* and among the *peoples*. We are given a hint of this at the very beginning of the Scriptures when God is shown about to create the world. We read that “*darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters*” (Genesis 1:2). The Spirit of God — he who inspired the prophets of God’s chosen people and who constantly led God the Son made man — was moving also across the nations. By his power he was giving light here and light there, leading certain ones to advance the understanding of God attainable by the mind and heart of man. For instance, despite their many errors — such as their lack of any account of creation from nothing — Plato and Aristotle were of great service to the later holy doctors of the Church. I see nothing to prevent us from regarding them as having been favoured with special help from above in their important probing of the foundations of reality. Zoroaster attained some notable religious insights. Mahomet came to regard himself as

God's Prophet, which is to say the definitive Messenger of God. The Christian does not allow this at all, of course, and is compelled to say that Mahomet fell into serious errors. Still, he attained a tremendous truth: that there is but only one God. He may have been assisted to a point from on high, and perhaps was influenced by Judaeo-Christian heretical traditions for further, if confused, light.

The greatest thing about man, apart from his fundamental gifts of being able to know external reality and to have the power to choose the right moral course, is *his innate desire to know and see God*. This profoundly natural desire is implanted in him by his Creator, and the Spirit of God is present to man at that fundamental level. He continues to hover over the waters of nature. Man's natural quest for God, authentic though obscured by his fallen condition, is a pledge and token of his *ultimate vocation to see God*. This call by God summoning him finally to see and be with him, and expressed, implanted and embodied in man's religious nature and instinct, is God's free gift to him. It cannot be fulfilled other than by

God's gift of grace and man's acceptance of divine revelation in Jesus Christ. The varied attempts by man (Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Islam, etc) with their numerous religious followings, to attain his own happiness and union with the Absolute (however variously conceived), are impressive manifestations of this innate and powerful desire. Man is manifestly a religious being who desires to *see God and be with him*. As already said, this desire in man is itself a token of God's freely-given call to him, though man does not normally recognize it as such. The call is there, and man acts in response to its impulse in various ways, with the religions of the world being the grand and multiform result. But as also said, ultimately the desire for God cannot be fulfilled without grace and an assent to the Person of Jesus Christ. He is the definitive Word, and was this from all eternity. He has come unto his own to make known the true and living God. He comes to reveal the living God in his own Person, for in him is the fullness of the Godhead present bodily. It is a breathtaking revelation, and to believe in Christ on the

testimony of the Church and the Scriptures, is to progress firmly along the path to the prize for which man is made to long. From before the foundation of the world, God chose us *in him* to be holy and blameless before him (Ephesians 1:4). Without Jesus Christ, man cannot get there. If anyone gets there, without consciously knowing and accepting Jesus Christ, it has nevertheless been through Jesus Christ who is the only way to the Father. “*He who has seen me has seen the Father*” (John 14:9); “*No one comes to the Father, except by me*” (John 14:6).

All of this brings us to our Gospel today: “*No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known*” (John 1: 1-18). The most important thing to be done in life is to believe in Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world, and to live according to his divine revelation. The next most important thing to be done is to bear witness to this fact before the world — the world which longs for God, with or without realizing it. The special challenge of our age is that it has decided that *this* world is all that there is. There is no real Supernatural,

let alone the God of Judaeo-Christian revelation. If there is something of truth in so-called divine Revelation, our age deems it to be irrelevant to the real and only business of life, which is to do the best with *this* life. This is the myth of the modern secular age, and for this reason it has to be helped to come to know Jesus Christ.



January 2 Before the Epiphany

Entrance Antiphon A holy day has dawned upon us:
Come, you nations, and adore the Lord, for a great light has
come down upon the earth.

Collect Grant your people, O Lord, we pray, unshakable
strength of faith, so that all who profess that your Only
Begotten Son is with you for ever in your glory and was
born of the Virgin Mary in a body truly like our own may
be freed from present trials and given a place in abiding
gladness. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who
lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 2:22-28; Psalm 98:1, 2-4;

John 1:19-28

*This is the testimony of John. When the Jews from
Jerusalem sent priests and Levites (to him) to ask him,
“Who are you?” he admitted and did not deny it, but
admitted, “I am not the Messiah.” So they asked him,*

“What are you then? Are you Elijah?” And he said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” He answered, “No.” So they said to him, “Who are you, so we can give an answer to those who sent us? What do you have to say for yourself?” He said: “I am the voice of one crying out in the desert, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as Isaiah the prophet said.” Some Pharisees were also sent. They asked him, “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet?” John answered them, “I baptize with water; but there is one among you whom you do not recognize, the one who is coming after me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie.” This happened in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing. (John 1: 19-28)

John The prophets received a direct communication from God entrusting them with a mission and his word. They looked to him and were heralds of him and his word to the people. Abraham received God’s word and a mission, and was faithful to it. The great feature of the divine word to Abraham was the promise, repeated in the

chapters that followed it, of Genesis 12:2-4. It said, “*I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing ... and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.*” Essentially, Abraham was to obey God, accept and believe his promises and announce the Prophecy to his family and line: “*The Lord said, ‘Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do...? No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice; so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him’*” (Genesis 18:17-18). He did this, and so he was the first of the *prophets* of the chosen people of God — his immediate audience being his family and children, especially his son Isaac. In a similar sense, both Isaac (who announced the Abrahamic Blessing to his son Jacob, as in Genesis 28:4) and Jacob were *prophets*. There were many prophets during the centuries that followed, especially *Moses the prophet and lawgiver*. God spoke to Moses repeatedly, and he announced his word to the chosen people. Indeed, most of the Torah, the

“Books of Moses”, give us various records of this work of Moses as *prophet*. At the end of this famous collection of scrolls, so fundamental for the revealed religion of the Hebrews, the editor sums up by stating that “*there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, none like him for all the signs and wonders which the Lord sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land*” (Deuteronomy 34:10-13). There was the great Samuel: “*The Lord was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the Lord ... and the word of Samuel came to all Israel*” (1 Samuel 3:19-4:1). There was Elijah, whose mission as prophet is described in the chapters following I Kings 17. There were Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezechiel and many other prophets, major and minor.

Now, there is one point of difference about the last of the prophets, John the Baptist. That he was held by the people to be a prophet, the New Testament makes clear.

Most notably, this was resoundingly confirmed by Jesus Christ. Indeed, our Lord makes clear that he was the greatest of them. But what we notice about John is that his principal mission was not just to receive the word of God recalling the people to repentance and to a renewed living of the covenant between God and his chosen people — a mission common to all the prophets. His particular mission was to announce the coming of One immediately after him, One who would supersede him, the One who was the Promised Messiah. Elijah had a divinely-appointed successor — Elisha — one who sought a double portion of Elijah's spirit. But Elijah's mission was not to announce the coming of Elisha. Elisha's mission was to carry on that of Elijah. It is legitimate to see in the succession of Elisha after Elijah something of a portent for the succession centuries later of Jesus after John, but the case is, of course, quite different. John's mission was to prepare the immediate way for Jesus. In this prophetic mission, John the Baptist's mission was unique in that as prophet his mission was to announce the arrival of another prophet —

in the event, *the Prophet* foretold by Moses, and indeed, to announce that the Messiah had come. It was also to declare that the One who was before them, in their very presence, was he! The Messiah was the One John concretely pointed to. Behold him! John said. *“The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world This is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God’”* (John 1: 29-34). This is an amazing declaration, a remarkable prophecy in the sense of an announcement of a revelation from God, received by him and passed on to others. It was both about a present event (the presence and identity of the Messiah) and about the future (the Messiah’s work of taking away the world’s sin, and baptizing with the Holy Spirit). My point here is that John’s mission as prophet was unique. It was to be *“the voice of one crying out in the desert, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as Isaiah the prophet said.”*

The Church reveres John the Baptist, celebrating not only his death by martyrdom, but even his very birth. But all this is to celebrate the surpassing greatness of the One whose herald he was, by divine appointment. John made it very clear that he was so very, very far behind Jesus Christ. *“They asked him, ‘Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet?’ John answered them, ‘I baptize with water; but there is one among you whom you do not recognize, the one who is coming after me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie”*” (John 1: 19-28). This is the meaning of John’s life and mission. Let us take it to heart, ever bowing down before the incomparable Person of Jesus Christ who calls us to a life of friendship with him.



January 3 Before the Epiphany

Entrance Antiphon Ps 118 (117):26-27 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord: The Lord is God and has given us light.

Collect O God, who in the blessed childbearing of the holy Virgin Mary kept the flesh of your Son free from the sentence incurred by the human race, grant, we pray, that we, who have been taken up into this new creation, may be freed from the ancient taint of sin. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 2:29-3:6; Psalm 98:1, 3cd-4, 5-6;
John 1:29-34

John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. He is the one of whom I said, 'A man is coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.' I did not know him, but the reason why I came

baptizing with water was that he might be made known to Israel.” John testified further, saying, “I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from heaven and remain upon him. I did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘On whomever you see the Spirit come down and remain, he is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ Now I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God.” (John 1:29-34)

John’s prophecy When Abraham was told by God of his high mission and calling – that “*by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves*” (Genesis 12:3) — we are not obliged to assume that Abraham understood the depth and height and extent of this divine Promise and Prediction. It was an announcement, implicitly and in germ, of the Incarnation of God the Son, of his Atonement for the sin of the world, of the mystery of the most holy Trinity, and of man’s calling to be incorporated into Christ and to be children and citizens of Christ’s eternal Kingdom. All of this was to be included in the Blessing that would come to “*all the families of the earth*” through

Abraham's faith and obedience. This we are able to see in light of the fulfilment in Christ of the revelation made to Abraham. Abraham was a true prophet, receiving the divine word and announcing it to those to whom he was charged to declare it. In Abraham's case it was to his children and his household: "*I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lordso that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him*" (Genesis 18:19). It was a fundamental, though obscure, prophecy of the coming of the Messiah — and our Lord declared that "*Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad*" (John 8:56). In some obscure way, this same revelation had been granted right at the beginning — after, indeed, man's primordial rebellion: "*I will put enmity between you and the woman ... he shall crush your head, and you shall bruise his heel*" (Genesis 3:15). The prophecies concerning the future Blessing continued and became more copious, though still obscure. Moses had foretold that "*the Lord your God will raise up for you a*

prophet like me from among you, from your brethren – him you shall heed” and this itself would be a fulfilment of what God had promised to Moses at Horeb (Deuteronomy 18: 15-19). The “*Jews*” from Jerusalem sent to ask John if he were the Prophet (John 1:21), and the people declared that Jesus was “*the prophet who is to come into the world*” (John 6:14). There had been other prophecies: the prophecy of Balaam concerning the star out of Jacob and the sceptre of Israel, the eternity of David’s throne, the Suffering Servant of Deutero-Isaiah, the Son of Man of Daniel, and many others.

But the point being made here is that the prophecies, though momentous, were nevertheless *obscure*. The Spirit of God was using the human mouthpiece to utter matters of which the speaker himself had but a limited grasp. The remarkable thing is the prophecy, shown to be wondrously fulfilled in the fullness of time. How grand is, say, the prophecy of Daniel: “*I saw in the visions of the night ... there came one like a son of man, ... and to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples should*

serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall never pass away” (7:13-14). It is clear and yet it is obscure, obscure in the sense that the method and extent of its fulfilment would not have been perceived by the prophet to whom it was given to utter it. All this brings us to our Gospel scene today (John 1:29-34), in which John the Baptist utters what is the most extraordinary prophecy (understood as the announcement to others of the word of God) to that point in the holy Scriptures. His prophecy concretises the prophecies concerning the Messiah. His mission was to prepare the way of the Lord and to make his path straight, which mission was itself a fulfilment of one of the prophecies of Isaiah (John 1:23). This John did by preaching repentance and readiness for the One who was coming, and who indeed had already arrived (1:26). But there was more to John’s mission. He was called to point the Messiah out — to identify him and to describe his mission. This is particularly remarkable. To no prophet before him had it been granted to do this. It was the high point of the promises: John the Baptist saw Jesus coming

toward him and said, “*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. He is the one of whom I said, ‘A man is coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.’ I did not know him, but the reason why I came baptizing with water was that he might be made known to Israel.*” John was very clear about who the Messiah was, though he may subsequently have been puzzled at the actual course Jesus was taking (Luke 7: 18-23). But there was more: John declared that Jesus was “*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*” and that “*he is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.*” Further, he stated that “*he is the Son of God.*” All this was revealed to John, and he openly announced it.

We do not have to assume that John fully understood what was revealed to him, and what he declared to others as a prophet. That Jesus was the Son of God was announced from heaven when the Holy Spirit descended on Christ at his baptism: “*You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased*” (Luke 3:22). Whether John fully grasped the total point here, we are not told. The remarkable thing,

though, is John's very declaration in our passage today, which is to say, his prophecy. He announced the Good News of the Gospel in advance, that Jesus would, as the Lamb of God and as Messiah and Son of God, take away the sin of the world and baptize with the Holy Spirit. It is the greatest of the prophecies, fulfilled beyond expectation and in so short a time.



January 4 Before the Epiphany

Entrance Antiphon Is 9:1 A people who walked in darkness has seen a great light; for those dwelling in a land of deep gloom, a light has shone.

Collect Grant us, almighty God, that the bringer of your salvation, who for the world's redemption came forth with newness of heavenly light, may dawn afresh in our hearts and bring us constant renewal. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 3:7-10; Psalm 98:1, 7-8, 9;
John 1:35-42

John was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God." The two disciples heard what he said and followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following him and said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are

you staying?” He said to them, “Come, and you will see.” So they went and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day. It was about four in the afternoon. Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, was one of the two who heard John and followed Jesus. He first found his own brother Simon and told him, “We have found the Messiah,” which is translated Christ. Then he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon the son of John; you will be called Cephas,” which is translated Peter. (John 1:35-42)

The Lamb There cannot be any doubt that, in the Gospel of St John, the figure and testimony of John the Baptist is of great significance. In the very Prologue of the Gospel, he is introduced as one sent by God to bear witness to the light that is the Word, in order that all might believe through him (1:7). John the Evangelist believed through him — it is commonly considered that John the Evangelist was one of the Baptist’s two disciples who followed Jesus. The Baptist’s testimony to Jesus was remarkable: “*Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*” He

“ranks before me ... I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven, and it remained on him ... this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. And ... this is the Son of God” (John 1: 29-34). We read that *“the next day again John was standing with two of his disciples”*. He saw Jesus as he walked by and repeated once again: *“Behold, the Lamb of God!”* (1:35-36). This title appears in one Gospel only — that of St John, and again in the Book of Revelation. We may take it that it derives from the prophecy (understood as the announcement of a revelation received by a prophet) of the Baptist about Jesus. But presumably the Baptist also drew on themes and passages from the Scriptures. For instance, there is the event in the life of Abraham which was an occasion of God’s renewed promise to bless him and his descendants (*“by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves”* Genesis 22:17-18). On this occasion, God ordered Abraham to *“take your son, your only son Isaac whom you love, ... and offer him there as a burnt offering”* (22:2). Abraham obeyed God immediately, and as he

made his way to the mountain, he (without realizing it) made a very significant prophecy. Isaac said to his father, “*where is the lamb for a burnt offering?*” Abraham said, *‘God will provide himself with the lamb for a burnt offering, my son’*” (22:7-8). God will provide the lamb! There would be a lamb of God for an offering, and God would provide it! There is a further prophecy of Abraham. He had been commanded to offer this sacrifice of his son on the mount of Moriah (22:2). After he offered the ram provided by the angel, he “*called the name of that place, The Lord will provide; as it is said to this day, ‘On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided’*” (22:14). In the fullness of time centuries later, the Lord God provided his Lamb for a sacrifice, and it was on the mount of Moriah at Jerusalem.

But there were other pointers to the coming Lamb. The Lamb of God is dramatically featured in Exodus 12 and 13, with the Jewish Feast of the Passover. God orders Moses to tell all of Israel that they are to take a lamb, every man according to their fathers’ houses. The lamb was to be

without blemish, and it was to be slain and completely consumed. Its blood was to be on the house of every one of the children of Israel, and the one showing this blood would be spared by the angel of death. The angel would pass over that person and family (Exodus 12: 1-13). This was to be a constant memorial, an annual feast on the fourteenth day of this month (Ex 12:6, [Nisan]), in which the lamb would be sacrificed. Over a millennium later, *God provided this Lamb for sacrifice*. Its blood, the blood to be consumed by those who followed the Lamb, would be man's salvation. Did John the Baptist think of the Paschal lamb? We do not know, but we may regard the words of John as a divinely-inspired prophecy that fulfilled the hints of the Scriptures long before. Then, of course, there is the lamb who features in the Deutero-Isaiah's prophecies of the man of sorrows acquainted with grief (53:3). He "*was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed.*" To what does the prophet liken this figure on whom the

Lord has laid “*the iniquity of us all*”? He is like a *lamb*! He is “*like a lamb that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth*”. Breathtakingly, “*he makes himself an offering for sin, And he shall bear their iniquities ... he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors*” (Isaiah 53: 7-12). Whoever has claimed such a mission? It was Jesus Christ, whom John called the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. All of this brings us to our Gospel passage today (John 1:35-42), in which John points to Jesus as the *Lamb of God*. He is encouraging his two disciples, perhaps his favourite and most promising ones, to follow the Lamb wherever he goes (Revelation 14:4). This they did. “*Jesus turned and saw them following him and said to them, ‘What are you looking for?’ They said to him, ‘Rabbi’ (which translated means Teacher), ‘where are you staying?’ He said to them, ‘Come, and you will see.’*”

What they did, we are called to do. To the whole world, the Church says, “*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*”. Let us listen to the

prophetic voice of the Church, and follow Jesus Christ, accepting his invitation to come and stay with him. Where does he stay? He stays with his spouse, his mystical spouse, the Church. There he stays as the Church's Bridegroom. From there he speaks to us, and there, in the Sacraments he gives himself to us. Thus do we come to live his divine life, and go forth each day to say to all, as did Andrew to Peter: "*We have found the Messiah.*"



January 5 Before the Epiphany

Entrance Antiphon Cf. John 1:1 In the beginning and before all ages, the Word was God and he humbled himself to be born the Saviour of the world.

Collect O God, who by the Nativity of your Only Begotten Son wondrously began for your people the work of redemption, grant, we pray, to your servants such firmness of faith, that by his guidance they may attain the glorious prize you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 3:11-21; Psalm 100:1b-2, 3, 4, 5;
John 1:43-51

Jesus decided to go to Galilee, and he found Philip. And Jesus said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the town of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one about whom Moses wrote in the law, and also the prophets,

Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth.” But Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come from Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Here is a true Israelite, in whom is no guile!” Nathanael said to him, “How do you know me?” Jesus answered and said to him, “Before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree.” Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.” Jesus answered and said to him, “Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than this.” And he said to him, “Amen, amen, I say to you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” (John 1:43-51)

The Truth In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle gives us a statement on *Truth*: “To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true”. *Truth* is a basic issue in thought and being, and it has been something of a topic of discussion for thousands of years. This is to be

expected, because man wants to know the *truth* even if in but limited ways. He must get his food, and so he seeks the *truth* about how it is to be grown or captured. He wishes to conquer his neighbours, and he seeks the *truth* about his neighbours' forces. Man needs to know the facts, and he understands (to a point) that it is in his interest to know them. Truth to tell, though, man generally seeks the truth to the extent that it serves his self-interest. It is uncommon to discover one who has a disinterested love for the truth, together with a realization that the truth is his greatest blessing whatever be the cost of adhering to it. It is rare indeed to find a person who, let us say, sees that he is culpably in the wrong, and voluntarily admits to it when he knows that it will bring down upon him severe sanctions and reprisals. Again, the person is rare who, knowing that something is true — say, the revealed Law of God (like the mother and her sons in the Second Book of Maccabees, chapter 7) — then refuses to renounce that truth even at the cost of life. The story of *the idea of Truth*, as we might call it, usually begins with the classical Roman and Greek

thinkers and philosophers, and proceeds to the vagaries of many modern philosophers. But there is one important source of *Truth*, and of *the idea of Truth*, which is often forgotten: it is biblical Israel with its revealed religion. Our supreme source for the idea of *Truth* is the word of Israel's greatest son: Jesus Christ. All this brings us to what our Lord says of Nathanael in today's Gospel (John 1:43-51) — Nathanael of Cana in Galilee (John 21:2) — who had expressed such a dim view of our Lord's home town which was not far from his own. Nathanael, our Lord observed, was "*a true Israelite, in whom there is no guile!*" In this high praise of Nathanael, our Lord is also giving us a key to the "true" character of Israel. The true child of Israel was distinguished by love for and adherence to the *truth*. He would have nothing to do with *duplicity*.

I remember it being once said that the idea of objective truth was originally Hellenic, which, indeed, influenced such Scriptural writings as the Gospel of St John. But our Lord's declaration about Nathanael, the "true Israelite", tells us that the true ethos of Israel was

Truth, both possession of the truth and love for it. Israel, whatever be the terms it might have used, knew it had the *truth*. When it was its truest and best self, it loved the truth above all and regarded it as man's salvation. What, then, was the truth, according to biblical Israel? Our Lord Jesus Christ, the superlative Man of Israel, prayed for his disciples in these words: "*Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth*" (John 17:17). The word of God is the truth. What Israel brought to the world, especially through Christ, was its declaration that *the truth is the revealed word of God*. In this sense, man lives by the truth. As Christ said to Satan, quoting Deuteronomy: "*It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'*" (Matthew 4:4). And what did our Lord describe himself to be? He is *the Way, the Truth and the Life*: so he himself is the Truth. No one comes to the Father but by him — by him who is the Truth (John 14:6). It is another way of saying that he is the Word of God become flesh. Moreover, he would send "*another Counsellor, to be with you forever, the Spirit of truth whom*

the world cannot receive” (John 14: 16-17). Satan is a liar from the beginning. Famously, when Jesus Christ stood before the representative of Caesar and the Empire, he declared that he was indeed a king, though his kingdom was not of this world. Thereupon Pilate was convinced of his complete innocence of any form of civil sedition and that he had been handed over because of jealousy. But consider our Lord’s declaration when asked if he was a king: *“I was born for this, I came into the world for this, to bear witness to the truth; and all who are on the side of truth listen to my voice”* (John 18:37). Let us look on this as a scene in which the revealed religion of Israel, present and fulfilled in Christ the Word made flesh, spoke to the pagan world. He spoke of the *truth*. He declared where, above all, it is to be found. In Pilate, the pagan world responded with a form of incomprehension: *“What is truth?”* (John 18:38). It is not just the great Greek philosophers who brought the idea of truth to the fore. Israel, and its greatest son Jesus the Messiah, is central to the story too.

There is a further point about Christ's summing up of Nathanael as "*a true Israelite, in whom there is no guile.*" It is that love for the truth and possession of it is not just a matter of intellect. It is a matter of the moral life too. It is the man of moral life who is the man of *the truth*. It is he who will seek the truth and come to it. The man who is good or who wants to be good will seek what is good, which is to say the truth. Nathanael was one in whom there was *no guile*, and he instantly recognized in Christ the Messiah, when Christ spoke. What Israel, above all in Christ, brought to the world in its idea of the Truth was also this: that one had to be *of the truth* to attain to it. Truth is ultimately *of God*. It comes to the man who is, implicitly or explicitly, *of the truth*, and therefore *of God*.



January 6 Before the Epiphany

Entrance Antiphon Ps 112 (111):4 A light has risen in the darkness for the upright of heart; the Lord is generous, merciful and just.

Collect Cast your kindly light upon your faithful, Lord, we pray, and with the splendour of your glory set their hearts ever aflame, that they may never cease to acknowledge their Saviour and may truly hold fast to him. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 5:5-13; Psalm 147:12-15, 19-20;
Mark 1:7-11 or Luke 3:23-38

When Jesus began his ministry he was about thirty years of age. He was the son, as was thought, of Joseph, the son of Heli, the son of Melea, the son of Menna, the son of Mattatha, the son of Nathan, the son of David, the son of Jesse, the son of Obed, the son of Boaz, the son of Sala, the son of Nahshon, the son of Amminadab, the son of Admin,

the son of Arni, the son of Hezron, the son of Perez, the son of Judah, the son of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham, the son of Terah, the son of Nahor, the son of Cainan, the son of Arphaxad, the son of Shem, the son of Noah, the son of Lamech, the son of Enos, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God. (Luke 3:23, 31-34, 36, 38)

This is what John the Baptist proclaimed: “One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” It happened in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. On coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” (Mark 1:7-11)

The Son Our Gospel passages today from Luke and/or Mark present Jesus in his manhood at the outset of his public ministry. Let us begin with Luke. The passage

from Luke gives us a genealogy of Jesus Christ. (Matthew also gives us a genealogy of Jesus, and it appears at the very outset of the Gospel prior to the birth of Christ. Luke, who has a more extensive account of the birth and infancy of Christ, and one different in its episodes from Matthew, provides his genealogy immediately after Christ's baptism and just prior to the beginning of his public ministry. Luke's genealogy is quite different from Matthew's — and of course this has led to innumerable discussions on which it would be foolish to pronounce in a brief reflection). Let us consider one feature of Luke's list of Christ's ancestors in order to draw from it a fundamental point *about his baptism*. The scene has been that of our Lord's baptism by John in the Jordan. In it Christ takes his part with sinners. "*When all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying...*" John's baptism was a rite in which the people acknowledged their sins in a semi-public fashion, appealing in this way for the pardon of God and the forgiveness of their sins. Christ, the One whom John demurred to baptize and who, he said, should

baptize him instead (Matthew 3:14), stepped forward with the people for this rite of acknowledging sin. That is to say, the Holy One of God was taking his part with sinners and standing in their place. His having done this, the Father immediately intervenes from heaven to declare that this One, thus presenting himself as one with sinners, was his “*beloved Son – with you I am well pleased*” (Luke 3:22). Luke then gives us more on Jesus: *he is a true member of the human race*, a brother to the peoples, one with whom all the nations may identify. He is a son of Adam like them — and *Luke shows us how he is this*, tracing the line from Joseph (Christ’s “supposed” father), through David, through Abraham, back to Adam the son of God. Indeed, there are no pauses in the list, as there are in Matthew’s account (after Abraham, David and Jechoniah). All ancestors are, as it were, on the same level as Luke makes his way towards the final point: All men are descended from Adam. *So is Jesus Christ*, whom the Father said is his “beloved Son”.

There is another thing about Luke's genealogy. Luke takes Christ, the beloved Son of God back to "*Adam, the son of God.*" We have, then, two great figures: Adam and Jesus Christ. Adam was a "son of God" because he was made directly by God in his image (and all men and women are God's children). He rebelled against God and profoundly deformed the image of God that he was. He was "*the son of God*" who sinned and brought death to the human race. His descendant was the "*beloved Son*" of God in a way beyond all expectation, the Holy One of God before whom the devils trembled. He is the eternal Son of God, the Word made flesh, whom God his Father sent to save the world. Satan approached Eve and led her into deliberate sin. Through Eve, Satan led Adam likewise into sin, and through them both took all mankind into sin. Christ, the son of Adam the son of God, takes his part with all his sinful brothers and sisters in order to lead them out of the terrible and hopeless morass. He will willingly allow the sin of the world to be heaped upon himself, and, bearing it upon his shoulders, will make full atonement for

it all. So it is that we are led to contemplate the two figures, Jesus Christ, the son of Adam, and Adam himself. There they stand. Christ is the new Adam, and it is he who redeems his father Adam and all of Adam's human offspring. There they stand, symbols of a great choice we must make. What is it to be? In Jesus Christ there is present the *human race* of which he a son, and this is symbolized by the genealogy of St Luke going back to Adam (St Matthew's genealogy emphasizes how thoroughly Christ is *Hebrew*, a true son of *Abraham*). How great a Hero is he! How sad a case was his father Adam! On the one hand we have the Hero of all heroes, on the other hand we have our tragic forefather — though redeemed by his grand descendant.

All of this can be seen to bring us to our alternative Gospel passage, that given us by Mark, in which Christ's identity as a Person is manifested from heaven. He is the beloved Son of the Father almighty, and is the object of God's delight. It is as if the Father now gazes upon the children of Adam with a profound pleasure, because Jesus

Christ has taken their part and will so fight as to gain for them the victory. The victory will be theirs if they place their faith in him as the Son of God and their brother as man, and do what he asks for their salvation.

Our Gospel scene occurs at the beginning of our Lord's public ministry. Jesus will present himself before the chosen people of God, and through them to all of humanity, as the Object of the most fundamental choice man can make. Are we *for* Jesus, or *not* for him? That is the question for every man and woman. If I take my stand *for* Jesus, Son of God and son of Adam, then the door has been opened to redemption and sanctification. *This is the will of God*, St Paul writes, *your sanctification*. Let us make the right choice, and let us do all we can to help others make it too.



January 7 Before the Epiphany

Entrance Antiphon Gal 4:4-5 God sent his Son, born of a woman, so that we might receive adoption as children.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who were pleased to shine forth with new light through the coming of your Only Begotten Son, grant, we pray, that, just as he was pleased to share our bodily form through the childbearing of the Virgin Mary, so we, too, may one day merit to become companions in his kingdom of grace. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 5:14-21; Psalm 149:1-5;

John 2: 1-11

On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine." "Dear woman, why do you involve me" Jesus

replied, “My time has not yet come.” His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.” Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, “Fill the jars with water”; so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, “Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet.” They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, “Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now.” This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed in Cana of Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him. (John 2:1–11)

Intercession Would our Lord have changed the water into wine had he not been asked to do so? It seems not — when asked to do so, he said to his holy mother that

“my time has not yet come.” St John does not give us a precise explanation of our Lord’s meaning here, but it does look as if he had not intended to reveal his glory at this point by performing “a sign.” He had arrived at the feast with his disciples, but to that point no miracle had been worked. His public ministry had not commenced. The point here, though, is that this changed when the mother of Jesus made her request. We are thus led to think of the power of the prayer of intercession. There is a further point about this, and it is that intercession ought have in mind the will and glory of God. Did Mary make her request simply because the bridal celebration was suddenly caught embarrassed by the wine being found to be gone? After all, doubtless there had been numerous occasions of inconvenience, difficulty, loss and suffering during the past thirty years of Christ’s presence within the Holy Family and within the village of Nazareth. Yet Mary would not have asked him to work miracles on those occasions. When she and Joseph were in a form of terror at his sudden loss over three days when he was twelve, he did nothing

miraculous to alleviate their anxiety — such as enlightening them by a happy thought as to where he probably was. There would have been the occasion when Mary's own parents died — those whom the Church celebrates each year as Saints Joachim and Anne. There is one tradition that they lived in the nearby cosmopolitan city of Zephoris. Did Mary suggest to Jesus, perhaps then a youth, to do for them what years later Martha and Mary asked of Jesus on behalf of their ailing brother Lazarus? What sadness the mother of Jesus must have felt at the death of her parents, but she never asked a miracle of her divine Son. What of the death of Joseph her holy husband, and Christ's foster-father? Christ worked no miracle for him, as he worked for others later on — curing them of their maladies and even raising them from the dead. Consider Jesus and Mary at the bedside of Joseph as he breathed his last, and then as he was being carried out for burial with Jesus and Mary following in sorrow. Christ lived in obscurity, showing no “signs” of his true glory.

No indeed — during the years prior to the wedding feast of Cana, Christ worked no miracles. The Gospel of St John specifically says that the changing of the water into wine was the *first* of his miracles, the *first* of his signs by which he let his glory be seen. Yet, prior to Cana Mary knew well who he really was — the incarnate Lord, the Creator and God of all. Plainly, the reason why the mother of Jesus presented this need to do something about the lack of wine at the wedding feast of Cana was that she thought the time was ripe for him *to begin his mission*. It was not just one more case of human and social difficulty and inconvenience (and, surely, not a very serious one in the larger scheme of things). The Mother of Jesus, ever full of grace and led by the Holy Spirit in her most holy life, sensed that, well, why not now? She could put it to her adorable Son — and so she did. That is to say, Mary's example of intercession indicates to us the power of prayer (especially the prayer of those who are close to Jesus), but also the importance of praying for those things which seem to be *for the glory of God*. Mary sensed that in this event

there would be a manifestation of the glory of God truly in accord with the divine plan. That is to say, she interceded for this need because she thought it was in accord with the will of God — and our Lord said on one occasion that his mother and his brethren are those who do the will of God. It was yet one more instance of the attitude she manifested to the angel Gabriel years before: *Behold, I am the servant of the Lord* (Luke 1:38). Her prayer seems, on the face of it, to have moved Jesus Christ to act in a way he had not originally intended, humanly speaking. While it shows the power of prayer even in matters that may not seem momentous, it also shows with what spirit we ought to pray. We ought approach prayer and our petitions before God with the mind of Christ, in this case as reflected in his most holy Mother. We ought ask, in the presence of God, if what we wish to pray for seems to be for his glory and the fulfilment of his adorable will. If it does, we ought ask for it because if we do not, much good may not be done. Our Lord may not have performed this sign had his Mother

not presented the need to him. There are many things our Lord did *because he was asked*.

At the same time, we must remember that, being human and radically limited in every way, we may be very mistaken in what we think to be for the best. We may, in the presence of God, judge our petition to be for the best but God may in his wisdom intend that our *specific* request not be granted — but answered with *suffering*. The great Spanish Armada was accompanied by a great surge of prayer by Catholic Spain. The Armada proved to be an historic debacle. Protestantism triumphed in England, the Catholic Church was pulverized there and by the end of the eighteenth century reduced to a trickle. It was a crucifixion of more than two centuries — but in God's plan that crucifixion may have been for the sake of God's Kingdom, and it may have been the divine answer to the Spanish prayer. How then should we pray? Let us pray with Mary our mother, in union with Jesus our God and Brother.



Epiphany of the Lord

At the Vigil Mass

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Baruch 5:5 Arise, Jerusalem, and look to the East and see your children gathered from the rising to the setting of the sun.

Collect May the splendour of your majesty, O Lord, we pray, shed its light upon our hearts, that we may pass through the shadows of this world and reach the brightness of our eternal home. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

At the Mass during the Day

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Mal 3:1; 1 Chron 29: 12 Behold, the Lord, the Mighty One, has come; and kingship is in his grasp, and power and dominion.

Collect O God, who on this day revealed your Only Begotten Son to the nations by the guidance of a star, grant

in your mercy, that we, who know you already by faith, may be brought to behold the beauty of your sublime glory. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-2, 7-8.10-11,12-13; Ephesians 3:2-3.5-6; Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him. When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. In Bethlehem in Judea, they replied, for this is what the prophet has written: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of

my people Israel.’ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him. After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. (Matthew 2: 1-12)

Christ and evil On December 26, 2004, there occurred the great earthquake below the Indian Ocean with its epicentre off the west coast of Sumatra, Indonesia. It put into common language the term “tsunami.” It triggered a series of devastating tsunamis along the coasts of most

landmasses bordering the Indian Ocean, killing over 230,000 people in fourteen countries, and inundating coastal communities with waves up to 30 meters high. It was one of the deadliest natural disasters in recorded history. Indonesia was the hardest hit, followed by Sri Lanka, India, and Thailand. It was the third largest earthquake ever recorded on a seismograph. Among other things it provoked a debate in the newspapers — as, for instance, in the *Sydney Morning Herald* — about the very existence of God. The usual questions were raised. If there is a God, he must be almighty, all-good and all-loving. But if God allows such a thing, how could he be loving? Or, if he had to allow it, how can he be all-powerful? There may not be a final and clinching *philosophical* answer to these perennial questions, but of course if we grant the existence of a God who is infinite, then in the nature of the case there would have to be a great deal we could not understand about him. There are great and hidden evils going on all the time. There are vast numbers of abortions every year in Australia, and far more

in the United States, not considering those of numerous other countries of the world. That is a human tsunami of immense proportions, and it is man-made. Why does God not prevent so many from performing and undergoing this snuffing out of so much innocent human life? For that matter, why does God not prevent so many other forms of suffering and evil? Why does he sustain a world in which there is any suffering at all? We do not know, but let us remember what ought be obvious *a priori*, that if there is to be an infinite God at all, we must not expect to fully understand his ways. We would have to expect mysteries in the governance of one who is infinite. As a matter of fact, though, he has revealed some things to us — such as the reason for the appearance of evil in the world. Evil did not come from God. St Paul writes in Romans that *sin entered the world through one man and with sin death, and death has spread to the whole human race.*

Sin and death spring ultimately, mysteriously, and somehow, from man. The undying disharmony between man and his world resulting in the world mistreating man,

and man mistreating the world, derives from man and his sin. How this can be so, is not revealed to us, but if we accept this revelation, it certainly shows how serious sin is, for sin has had this catastrophic effect. It has also been revealed that God has not willed what man did. Let that vast tsunami of several years ago remind us of the moral earthquake, the moral disharmony, that sin within man causes. Man's sinful desires, his anger, his lust, his sloth, his pride, continually cause tsunamis in the heart of man, destroying a life to be lived according to what is right. Now, God has revealed not only the *source* of the disorder in man and his world, but also the means of a wondrous restoration. He has given the Answer: *This is my beloved Son*, he said. *Listen to him!* Let us take our cue from the Wise Men from the East who came to reverence Him. Let us see in the Magi a symbol of the nations finding in Jesus Christ the answer to the world's plight. If we want light on the mysteries of life, let all contemplate Jesus Christ, seeking in him the light of life. If suffering bewilders us, well then, why did Christ himself have to suffer?

Repeatedly our Lord said to his disciples that he had to suffer if he was to fulfil his mission and enter into his glory. No one's suffering was equal to his because he was atoning for the sins of the whole world. *Why* did the Father allow this to happen, that his own Son, equal to himself in glory and divinity, should be made to suffer as he did? We are not told. It is a mystery. But what we are told is that out of that suffering came the redemption and sanctification of the human race, provided man accepts in faith the offer of the Gift. Man may ruin by his sin the work of God's hands, but God can bring unimagined good out of this terrible evil. Nothing is impossible for God. Like the Wise Men, let the peoples contemplate the Redeemer. Let us all follow him, whatever be the cost.

The Wise Men from the East came to Christ, gazed on him, and rendered him their homage. Let us constantly gaze on the life and figure of Jesus Christ. When we see or experience evils in our lives, and when vast sections of mankind experience evil, we can be sure that God is working to bring good out of that evil. But the one

condition for this to happen is that, when evil comes our way, we hold on to Christ and endeavour to do God's will. Let us make Christ the source of our light and life, and do our best to manifest him to the world as the light of every man. Let us by our daily lives present him to others as Mary and Joseph presented him to the Magi.



Monday after the Epiphany

Entrance Antiphon A holy day has dawned upon us:
Come, you nations, and adore the Lord, for a great light has
come down upon the earth.

Collect O God, whose eternal Word adorns the face of the
heavens yet accepted from the Virgin Mary the frailty of
our flesh, grant, we pray, that he who appeared among us
as the splendour of truth may go forth in the fullness of
power for the redemption of the world. Who lives and
reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for
ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 3:22-4:6; Psalm 2:7bc-8, 10-12a;
Matthew 4:12-17.23-25

*When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison,
he returned to Galilee. Leaving Nazareth, Jesus went and
lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of
Zebulun and Naphtali — to fulfil what was said through the
prophet Isaiah: Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the*

way to the sea, along the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles — the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. From that time on Jesus began to preach, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon possessed, those having seizures, and the paralysed, and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him. (Matthew 4:12-17.23-25)

Redeemer of all In the year 2008 a painting of Mary holding the child Jesus was commissioned in Australia, and when it was finished and released, it was certainly a good painting. But I, for one, did not like it because the figure of Mary the mother of Jesus appeared too Australian. For me, she looked too much like a young

Australian woman one might see anywhere in Sydney, and I myself found it hard to connect her features with the person of Mary the mother of Jesus Christ. In fact, I learnt later that the artist had taken for his model a young Sydney woman, whose father, indeed, was known to me. Then I heard it said that the artist himself had remarked that he could see in his painting something of his wife — and he meant that as adding to the value of his painting because of the love he put into his work. But for myself, all this did not help my liking for the painting, even though it was plainly a good artistic production. Now, while I myself did not like the too-Australian look of the figure in the painting, there is quite another side to the question — and it *vindicates* the Australian-look of that picture. It is that Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, and even more so her divine Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, identify with all humanity. In the case of Mary, from the Cross Jesus Christ gave her, his holy mother, to John, the beloved disciple. The Church has always seen this as Christ's gift of his mother to the Church and to every member of the Church.

Thus in Christ, Mary is spiritual mother of all believers, and indeed is spiritual mother of all humanity. Chinese may call on her as mother, as may the African, the European, the Asian and the Australian. In Christ, she, in a sense, becomes Asian, Australian, all — and this is reflected in paintings of a *Chinese* Madonna, an *Australian* (European) Madonna, an *Australian Aboriginal* Madonna, all. But setting aside the mother of Jesus Christ, this point is especially so with the Redeemer of man himself. By becoming man, the Son of God identified himself with every man. In country after country of his travels, Pope John Paul II was very fond of saying that Jesus Christ became African, Asian, European. Whatever be the nation — Christ has made that nation his own and has identified with it. In this sense it is natural and legitimate to depict Jesus Christ as Asian, European, African, whatever.

Today we celebrate Monday after the Epiphany, and the Church provides us with texts from Scripture which enable us to continue in the glow of the Epiphany, which is to say in the thought of Jesus Christ as meant for all the

nations. The Gospel scene of the Epiphany is that of the Christ-child being manifested to the pagan Wise Men from the East. He is not just the King of the Jews, the Jewish Messiah who would save his own people from their sins. He is the Messiah for the entire world, who will save all mankind from its sins. The Magi from the East symbolize mankind's stake in Christ and his universal mission. Christ is meant to be not only Jewish, but in another sense Greek, Arabian, and Persian too. Our Gospel today (Matthew 4:12-17.23-25), though drawn from our Lord's public life, continues this thought. Jesus leaves Judea after his baptism — and Judea was the quintessential Jewish locale — and returns to Galilee. Galilee was Jewish to a certain point, but was also notably cosmopolitan. The leaders of the Jews retorted to Nicodemus (when Nicodemus defended our Lord) that prophets do not come out of Galilee. I am sure that our Lord, having grown up in Galilee, and in a village so near to the bustling and developing city of Zephoris, was multi-lingual, knowing not only Aramaic and able to read (and possibly write) the classical Hebrew

of the Scriptures, but would have been fluent in common Greek and Latin, and perhaps, to a limited degree, a neighbouring language or two as well. The point I am making here, though, is that our Gospel today is putting before our contemplation the *Christ of the nations*. He is the Redeemer not only of the Jews but of all men. So it is that we read Matthew stating that Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, that the Galilee of the Gentiles (of the nations), “*Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, along the Jordan,*” have seen a great light. They were a people in darkness, “*living in the land of the shadow of death,*” but now on them a light has dawned. Matthew it was who told us of the Magi coming from the East — a land of darkness — who were led by the light of a star from heaven to the King of the Jews. They came and worshiped him, for he was their King too. In our Gospel today, Christ announced to *the Galilee of the Gentiles* that the Kingdom was near.

While our Lord’s specific temporal mission was to the lost sheep of the House of Israel, he gave many tokens of

his ultimate mission to all the nations. He spoke courteously and with high praise of the faith of the Centurion. Again, he praised the faith of the Canaanite woman. He spent two days in the Samaritan village, where many of the people hailed him as the Saviour of the world. He received the Greeks just before his Passion, and on various occasions he alluded to those who would come from east and west. Finally, he sent his disciples to the whole world, to make disciples of all the nations. He is Brother to all the nations, and counts as having been done to himself what is done to the least person anywhere. Whoever we are, he wishes to manifest himself to us in all his saving glory.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 4:12-17.23-25)

The living light Immediately following on the manifestation of the infant Messiah to the Wise Men of the East, the Church takes us to the manifestation of the Messiah at the beginning of his public ministry in Galilee.

Christ's work there is fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah predicting that the Galilee of the nations — the Galilee that is made up of various nations — would see a great light. This in its turn presages the light of Christ being brought to all the nations. We are reminded that Christ is the light of the world — not just of Catholics, not just of Anglicans, nor other Christians, but of every human being. He is not just *a* light, but *the* Light of the world. This is particularly difficult for our age to see and accept, conscious as we are of various cultures, various religions, and various great religious leaders in history. *No-one can come to the Father except through me*, our Lord told his disciples. He is the one Light that takes us to the Father. *He who sees me, sees the Father*, he said. *I am the Light of the world*, he said again. The one who refuses to follow me, walks in the darkness. But there is more even than this. Christ is not just the great Light of the past, whose teaching is the light of every man in the way that the teaching of Socrates or Plato or Aristotle may be claimed to be. No, Christ is a living Person who can be located, approached, and entered

into communion with. His voice and ongoing teaching as applied to the issues of each generation can be identified. There is a living oracle, uttering his teaching. Where is it? It is in the Catholic Church, of which he is the Founder and living Head. His Spirit is its animating soul. We are his members, and the successor of Peter is his visible vicar.

We know where this Light is. Let us live by the living Light that is Christ, and bring it to others.



Tuesday after the Epiphany

Entrance Antiphon Ps 118 (117):26-27 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord: The Lord is God and has given us light.

Collect O God, whose Only Begotten Son has appeared in our very flesh, grant, we pray, that we may be inwardly transformed through him whom we recognize as outwardly like ourselves. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 4:7-10; Psalm 72:1-2, 3-4, 7-8;
Mark 6:34-44

When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things. By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. This is a remote place, they said, and it's already very late. Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves

something to eat. But he answered, You give them something to eat. They said to him, That would take eight months of a man's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat? How many loaves do you have? he asked. Go and see. When they found out, they said, Five - and two fish. Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to set before the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand. (Mark 6: 34-44)

The loaves There is a beautiful little book of just a few pages wedged between the book of Judges and the two books of Samuel. I refer to the book of Ruth which tells the story of a Moabite woman who became part of the

Israelite people by her marriage with Boaz of Bethlehem. The story opens in the time of the Judges — the period between Moses and David. A man from Bethlehem of Judah left with his wife and two sons to go to Moab because of a famine. When there, he died, leaving his wife Naomi. Her two sons married Moabite women, and after ten years those two sons died. Naomi was left with no-one, except the wives of her deceased sons. When word reached her that the famine had lifted back in Bethlehem, Naomi decided to return to her homeland. One of her two daughters-in-law chose reluctantly to stay behind in Moab, but Ruth, the other, resolved to remain with Naomi and went with her to Bethlehem. Ruth shows admirable filial piety. Here we have two ordinary, obscure, women — Naomi of Bethlehem, and her pagan daughter-in-law, Ruth. The attention of the book is on Ruth — loyal and obedient to Naomi, and resolved that “*wherever you lodge, I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God my God*” (1: 16). So we are speaking of what we might call a humble, good, unimportant nobody. Because of various

circumstances she married Boaz, and what then happened? Ruth bore a son, Obed, and Obed was the grandfather of King David. So Ruth, the obscure pagan Moabitess, became the great-grandmother of King David and therefore, as it turned out, an ancestor of the Messiah. This brief but very significant book ends with a short genealogy connecting Perez (the son of Judah) with Boaz, the husband of Ruth and David their great-grandson. This genealogy in turn is used by St Matthew in his genealogy of the Messiah, and in it Matthew specifically mentions Ruth. In the next stage of his genealogy — that between David and the Exile to Babylon — Matthew again mentions an ordinary woman, the wife of Uriah. Following David's murder of Uriah, she was taken by him in marriage and bore to him King Solomon. So we have two otherwise obscure women who, amid certain happenings, were chosen in the providential plan of God to be instruments of his messianic purposes. God seems to delight in using small and ordinary persons and things to bring forth something great and beautiful.

In our Gospel today (Mark 6: 34-44), we read that *“when Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.”* May we not see in that large crowd a symbol of the world, the flow of peoples through history, the concourse of mankind whom our Lord was to save? There lay a large crowd before him, and they were like sheep without a shepherd. At the end of his teaching, our Lord directed his disciples to feed them. All they had was five loaves and two fish, with five thousand men before them, not mentioning any women and children among them. Contemplate those five loaves and two fish, and the task ahead! Contemplate, for that matter, the task of redemption that lay ahead, and how God had used the likes of Ruth and the wife of Uriah. If it is God’s plan, nothing is impossible to him, however modest be the means at hand. With the five loaves and two fish, and with his very ordinary disciples carrying out his orders, our Lord fed the vast crowd to their heart’s content, and left them fully satisfied.

A feeling common to so many people is, what have I to show for myself? What is my life amounting to, especially in view of the failures and ordinariness of my course? I command no special respect among my acquaintances. I cannot point to much in the way of achievements in the past or the present. My marriage has had all its ups and downs, and my children leave so much to be desired. I am a failure, or at least I am not much of a success. All that seems to lie before me is an uneventful life, an ordinary round, like the donkey doing not much more than going round and round, pulling the wheel. But no. Let the thought of the five loaves and the two fishes give every person hope in God. He can use my life, such as it is. I am but a piece of one of those loaves. God can multiply the effects of my unworthy efforts. I must, within my very limited round, keep his will and grow in his friendship. Despite my poverty of life and soul, through the mercy of God I have a place given me. Let me present myself to him and place myself in his hands.

What mattered in our scene was *the blessing of Christ*, followed by the breaking of the loaves. “*Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to set before the people.*” Let us ask him to take us into his hands and confer on us his blessing. Then, as with the loaves, so with us — we must be “*broken.*” That is to say, an indispensable part of being blessed by Jesus Christ is the presence of the cross. It was necessary that Jesus suffer and so enter his glory. It is necessary that we follow in his footsteps as he carries his cross. It is necessary that, as with the loaves and the fishes which he broke in his hands, our path be that of the cross. With the cross — provided we carry it with Christ — we shall reign.

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Second reflection: (Mark 6:34-44)

The good shepherd When Our Lord saw the large crowd, he took pity of them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. As stated above, let us consider that

divine view of mankind. The crowd before Christ represents mankind. Mankind is like those sheep without a shepherd. As we think of the various systems of human thought and the history of man's religions, it is obvious — when set against what God has actually revealed — how far from the truth mankind tends to go, and has actually gone. There is much that is true in what man has attained in his intellectual search, his culture and his religions. But there is much and significant error too. It is a lesson to us on the depth of our need for God the Good Shepherd, revealed as such in Christ.

Christ is the answer to this need of mankind. He is the Shepherd, and he looks with compassion on our need. He will feed us with what we need if we turn to him and do his will. God wants us this year to accept Christ as the Shepherd whom we consistently follow, and whom we lead others to follow. Let there be nothing and no one who takes this primary place of Christ in our life.



Wednesday after the Epiphany

Entrance Antiphon Isaiah 9:1 A people who walked in darkness has seen a great light; for those dwelling in a land of deep gloom, a light has shone.

Collect O God, who bestow light on all the nations, grant your peoples the gladness of lasting peace and pour into our hearts that brilliant light by which you purified the minds of our fathers in faith. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today 1 John 4:11-18; Psalm 72:1-2, 10, 12-13;
Mark 6:45-52

Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray. When evening came, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was

against them. About the fourth watch of the night he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out, because they all saw him and were terrified. Immediately he spoke to them and said, Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid. Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened. (Mark 6: 45-52)

God-with-us The city of Vienna has had a distinguished record of giving birth to schools of thought, including psychiatry. One such was that spearheaded by Victor Frankl, the founder of logotherapy and one-time lecturer at the University of Vienna. His most famous book was *Man's Search For Meaning*. According to the *New York Times* (November 20, 1991) this book was, at the time, one of “the ten most influential books in [the United States].” At the time of Frankl's death 1997, the book had sold 10 million copies in twenty-four languages.

According to Frankl, the book is designed to answer the question “How was everyday life in a concentration camp reflected in the mind of the average prisoner?” In his career in psychotherapy, Frankl debunked the theories of Freud, Adler and Jung which understand man as driven by instinctual urges (such as sex, power and vague, ancestral archetypes), and he put his finger, instead, on man’s fundamental requirement to make sense of life. Man needs to see a meaning in things. The modern tragedy, Frankl thought, was that there is now a widespread existential vacuum, a lack of meaning needed to make life worthwhile. This “meaning” is, he thought, something that each man must find for himself — importantly, through his conscience. This obviously vindicates the importance of a religious faith for the happiness of man. It is indisputably an advance on Freud, Adler and Jung in that it places the emphasis on what, with conscience leading the way, one *ought to know*, rather than just on one’s instinctive urges. Frankl was a Jew, yet his theory has received widespread endorsement from Catholic sources, and in proportion to

this favour coming from the Church, the Freudians and Jungians tend to reject him. However, the further question, of course, must be determined and it is of the utmost importance. It is not enough just to have a sense of meaning. Each person must conscientiously seek the *true and objective* meaning of things, most especially that which God the Creator has revealed. The Christian message is that the *true* meaning of life is found in accepting Christ and his teaching, and in bringing one's life into total alignment with his revelation.

It is God who gives meaning to things — not just any “God,” but the God who revealed himself and his plan for man. There is a scholarly view of the sacred name of Yahweh which understands the Name as signifying both his ineffable being and his unceasing presence to man. The awful “I AM” is not only the One who Is, but is also the One who is always there, the One who is with his people always. He is the One who is with us, God-with-us. This priceless revelation reached its permanent fulfilment in the Person of Jesus Christ, who is, as the Gospel of St Matthew

calls him, *God-with-us* (1:23). This is perhaps the key point, that in Jesus Christ, God is with us. He who is Love, he who so loves the world, is with us always, whatever may happen. Reason can attain something of an insight into the incomparable immanence of God to each of his creatures, but his closeness to us is revealed in vivid detail in the Person of Jesus Christ. No matter what might happen, Jesus my God, my Brother, my Redeemer, is with me. As St Thomas More put it in his letter to his daughter, though I lose my head, I'll come to no harm. This is the “meaning” of things, and it is the true and objective truth of the matter. In our Gospel today (Mark 6: 45-52) our Lord sends his disciples ahead of him while he dismisses the crowds. Then he goes up the mountain to pray. The disciples do his bidding — and as a direct result of doing his bidding they find themselves in difficulties. But all the while they are under the gaze of the Master. He is watching. *“When evening came, the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on land. He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was*

against them.” They were not alone, but they did not know this. They would have thought that they were indeed alone — and this is the trap we can all fall into if we allow our faith to weaken. What a difference it would make to every predicament we are in, even if we do not manage the situation to our satisfaction, and even if we are actually submerged by it, if at every point right through to the very end we know that God is with us in the person of Jesus Christ. That is surely a lesson of our Gospel passage today. In the midst of their difficulties, Christ knew and was watching. Nothing could separate them from him.

We know what happened. In the event, he chose to come to them across the water. Let us imagine him walking on the waves, rising and falling with the waves, striding quickly and masterfully, looming closer to the boat and pausing. *Courage*, he said to them, *Do not be afraid* — *it is I*. If Jesus Christ is an objective Fact to us, if we realize his objective presence in our lives even if unseen, then there will not be any existential vacuum in us, whatever be the tribulations that descend upon us. Though

I lose my head, I'll come to no harm. Let us renew our appreciation of the risen and glorious Jesus, God-with-us, though unseen. Let us, as did the disciples, receive him into our boat, and allow him to be the Master of our lives and of all that might surround us.

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Second reflection: (1 John 4:11-18)

Everything for Love There are various ambitions that can take hold of us, consciously or not. We can be possessed by the ambition of taking revenge for some past wrong. Our ambition could be material security, success in career, or whatever. In his first Letter, St John tells us (4: 11-18) that since God has loved us so much, we too should love one another. Our ambition in life should be to be filled with the thought of God's love for us, and in view of that, to love one another. If we do this God will be living in us, and we in him. Our idea of human perfection ought to be the perfection of God's love in us, leading us to strive to love others to perfection.

This is to be lived out in the commonplace details of daily life that we see described in today's Gospel passage (Mark 6: 45-52) — the crowds eating, the disciples going into their boats to row across to the other side. There will be difficulties and storms, but Christ will always be near, coming towards us, saying to us, "*Courage, it is I. Do not be afraid.*" Let us set out on the daily path of love, determining to live it to perfection.



Thursday after the Epiphany

Entrance Antiphon Cf. John 1:1 In the beginning and before all ages, the Word was God and he humbled himself to be born the Saviour of the world.

Collect O God, who through your Son raised up your eternal light for all nations, grant that your people may come to acknowledge the full splendour of their Redeemer, that, bathed ever more in his radiance, they may reach everlasting glory. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 4:19-5:4; Ps. 72:1-2, 14, 15bc, 17;

Luke 4: 14-22

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his

custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. Isn't this Joseph's son? they asked. (Luke 4: 14-22)

The Light There is a passing remark in our Gospel passage today that invites consideration. We read that our Lord, in the power of the Holy Spirit, returned to Galilee where news about him spread everywhere. In the midst of this reputation he returned to his home village of Nazareth and on the Sabbath day he went to the

Synagogue, “*as was his custom.*” Let us consider our Lord’s “*custom*” in observing the Sabbath during his years growing up at Nazareth. One of the distinctive features of Jewish religious life, when compared with that of the peoples of classical times, was precisely its observance of the Sabbath. There was the Sabbath rest, and there was attendance at the Synagogue. It was the Lord’s Day, and we can imagine how holy that day was in the family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Work ended on the evening of the Friday, and the three went together to the Synagogue and participated in its service on the Saturday, the Sabbath. Let us imagine them, the holiest trio in the history of the world, the ones with the most profound and accurate knowledge of the mind and law of God, quietly in the Synagogue participating in the Sabbath service. There were psalms, readings, prayers, together with addresses on the Scriptures by the Synagogue leader or those whom he invited to speak. The amazement of the villagers on the occasion of our Gospel today suggests to me that our Lord had not spoken publicly in the Synagogue during his years as a

villager. He was, with his mother and foster-father, a faithful participant, praying, singing, and listening respectfully to the teachings given in the Synagogue. The Spirit of God hovered over the Judaism that flowed from Abraham, the patriarchs and the prophets. As a twelve year-old, Jesus was found sitting among the doctors of Jerusalem, *“hearing them and asking them questions”* (Luke 2: 46). There was a Jewish Tradition which bore within it the Scriptures and their interpretations. The mind and plan of God was, to a point, known by the people — but only to a point, for much was obscure.

The most tantalizing obscurity, the most far-reaching ambiguity, was the prophetic expectation of the Messiah. Various things had been said in the Scriptures about the One who was coming, but there was no clear and authoritative interpretation about it borne along in the nation’s Tradition. Suddenly a voice began to be heard and it spoke of the One who was coming — that voice was John the Baptist. He announced the arrival of the Messiah, and charged the people to get ready to receive him. The

Messiah was in their midst, unknown to them — and before he was taken from the scene, John identified the Messiah. He was Jesus of Nazareth. Perhaps this fact had not yet reached the ears of many Galileans, and in particular, the people of Nazareth. So here was Jesus back with them, and with a growing reputation of being a prophet of God. With his mother he went to the Synagogue on the Sabbath, “*as was his custom,*” and this time — perhaps the first — he stood up to read. He selected the book of the prophet Isaiah, and read the messianic prophecy. Imagine our Lord reading what the Holy Spirit — whom he knew so intimately as the third divine Person — had authored. Imagine the expression with which our Lord read it, and the meaning his reading of it would have brought out. Imagine his words of explanation that followed, and of which Luke gives us a mere summary in our text. It was absolutely riveting for the people. They had never heard such speech before, let alone from the lips of Jesus. It proclaimed an absolutely authoritative interpretation of the Scriptures and of the

entire Tradition of the people of God. Jesus of Nazareth was the divine Oracle telling all what it was that God had meant. He spoke with authority, not like the scribes. He presented himself as the Light of every man. While prior to him God had spoken to the people in various ways, and they had been helped by the Spirit of God to understand and apply it to a point, now God was speaking to them in his Son. The moment when Christ rose to speak in the Synagogue was the moment when a certain level of light was replaced by the pure Light of the world.

Let us appreciate anew the greatness of this divine Light that is Christ. A people that lived in darkness and the shadow of death, St Matthew writes, began to see a great light. That light will flood the darkness of our lives if we but stay close to him. The light can be welcomed, or it can be rejected. Men can prefer darkness to the light — and this is what happened at Nazareth. They saw the light, marvelled at it, but then turned against it. The time of the Epiphany is the time when we think of Christ being manifested. He manifested himself to Nazareth, and they

rejected him. Let this not happen to us! Let it not happen that we are found among those who reject him.

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Second reflection (1 John 4:19-5:4)

Working with love Many people believe in God, and believe in him with passion. Many do not believe in him, and perhaps a much greater number are indifferent. But we can say that almost all believe in true selfless love. The goodness of selfless love, when seen, is self-evident to man's natural conscience. This is so, especially when it is a question of love for those in need. Mother Teresa of Calcutta was recognised universally as one who dedicated her life to the love of those in need. She showed true love for one's brother — what St John is referring to in his first Letter. There are various ways this love for one's brother in need can be lived out — in direct service of the poor, or in bringing the light of Christ and Christian teaching to others, including the young. But whatever is the field, it is this love for the needy which, when present, manifests and

proves the presence of the love of God. God's existence becomes more manifest through the selfless love of the one who believes in him. If, during our life, we are endeavouring to grow in our love for God by fidelity to various practices of piety — essential as they certainly are — and show little love for others, then St John tells us that our love for God is very poor indeed. Our Lord in his description of the Last Judgment (Matthew 25) makes this abundantly clear.

This is why our daily work has an essential place in our Christian life. It is by means of our work that we serve others in justice and charity. Our work is a most important means of personal sanctification — just as it is a most important means whereby we contribute to the sanctification of others. Let us so work that we sanctify the work itself, and ourselves in the process, and also the ones for whom we do our work. The key to the doing of this is to do it with real love.



Friday after the Epiphany

Entrance Antiphon Ps 112 (111):4 A light has risen in the darkness for the upright of heart; the Lord is generous, merciful and just.

Collect Grant, we ask, almighty God, that the Nativity of the Saviour of the world, made known by the guidance of a star, may be revealed ever more fully to our minds. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 5:5-13; Psalm 147:12-15, 19-20;
Luke 5:12-16

While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him, Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean. Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. I am willing, he said. Be clean! And immediately the leprosy left him. Then

Jesus ordered him, Don't tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them. Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. (Luke 5: 12-16)

Man's need *The Confessions of St Augustine* is a classic autobiography. Another is the *Apologia pro Vita Sua* of John Henry Newman — and it could even be said that the word “Apologia” has been given a greater prominence in English as a result of the appearance of his book in 1864. It was a defence against the charge of duplicity thrown at him by Charles Kingsley. One of the notable, even startling, things which Newman says in his book is that were it not for the clear and certain voice of God speaking in his conscience and in his heart, he “should be an atheist, or a pantheist, or a polytheist” when looking into the world (Ch.5). He did not mean to deny the force of the arguments in proof of a God drawn from external

reality, but they alone would not bring him to *conviction*. Now, what is it in the world which would have led him to atheism, had he not the fundamental certainty springing from the voice of his conscience? It is the evil in the world which seems to belie the fact of a good and loving Creator. Newman, then, — Newman the saint and great Christian thinker — allows that the problem of evil and suffering is indeed a great difficulty in the absolutely primary truth of God. He does not admit that it was ever a cause for *doubt* in him, but it was indeed a cause for difficulty. Why does God allow what goes on in the world — for, as Newman writes, “the sight of the world is nothing else than the prophet’s scroll, full of ‘lamentation, and mourning, and woe.’” It inflicts upon the mind “the sense of a profound mystery, which is absolutely beyond human solution.” The believer, let us add, ought then to have compassion for the person who, lacking a prior and sure belief, is confirmed in unbelief by the experience of life and the sight of the world. The dilemma is encapsulated in its well-known expression: if God were all-powerful and all-loving he

would fix it all up. He does not, so he is either impotent to do so, or does not sufficiently care. In either scenario, whatever he is, he could not be what man calls “God.” The intellectual difficulty is plain, but what gives it pathos is that human beings are crushed. Does not God care? Can’t he do something about this?

All sorts of rational answers could be given, and are given, to meet the problem of evil. The religions of the world have their answers — and I can think of one British anthropologist of primal religions who thought that a key to understanding such religions is the answer they severally give to this problem. But God has given us a revelation, and this brings us to our Gospel today (Luke 5: 12-16). In our passage today we have a man in a state that exemplifies all that we have been talking of. He is “*full of leprosy*”. Let us note in passing that, despite his terrible affliction, despite the problem of evil as it engulfed him, he was not led to unbelief. It was obviously a terrible difficulty, but there is no sign in him that he doubted the existence or love of God. He comes to our Lord and begs, “*Lord, if you are*

willing, you can make me clean.” Our Lord’s response was immediate: “*I am willing. Be cleansed!*” Well then, why does this not happen every time man appeals to God for aid? That man does appeal continually to God (or his gods) for aid is obvious in the myths and rites of the world’s religions, most notably in the practice of Revealed Religion, and in particular, in the living of the Christian Religion. Now, the fact that the Gospels are replete with miracles of healing shows the power and the desire of God to relieve man of his suffering. But while our Lord showed by his miracles both the willingness and the power, he also showed that in God’s wisdom the priority was not to take away all suffering — immediately and in this life. The principal reason for Christ’s ministry of healing was to signal the liberation he would offer from a much deeper evil, the evil of *sin*. Further, while Christ urged us to ask God our Father for whatever we need, at times he refused to grant what was asked of him. On one occasion his close disciples presented a request that meant so much to them. James and John asked that he place them at his right and

his left in his kingdom. He did not accede to that request, *in that form*. Again, when Christ expelled the demons from the man in the land of the Gadarenes, that man begged our Lord to let him follow him. But our Lord refused the request *in that form* — and gave him a different way of following him. He set him to speak of the goodness of God to his own people.

Our Lord's refusal to accede to this or that need or request did not signify a lack of love or a lack of power. It signified that what was requested was not for the best. What is for the best for us, for mankind and for the world, may not be apparent to us. In one of our Lord's parables, the owner of the field instructs his servants not to pull out the weeds with the wheat. It was best to leave the weeds, and their separation from the wheat would come at harvest time. Let our Gospel today assure us once again that the God-Man, who is Jesus Christ, has both the power and the love to aid, whatever be our need. At the same time, let us always understand that God also has the wisdom to know how best to answer our needs and our prayer.

Second reflection: (Luke 5:12-16)

Christ and the root of evil The Octave of the Epiphany celebrates Christ's *manifestation* in different senses. In our Gospel event today (Luke 5: 12-16), given to us during the octave of the Epiphany, something very special is manifested about our Lord. The leper presented himself to our Lord and said, "*Sir, if you want to you can cure me.*" Our Lord said, "*Of course I want to, be cured!*" So our Lord's desire to cure him, to bring him life in abundance, was *manifested*. Our Lord showed forth both his love and his power. The Gospels were written to reveal the mind and heart of Christ and to show that he is the Son of God and Saviour of the world. He took away some of the evils afflicting some people — those who asked him with faith, and some others besides. But they were signs of who he was, signs of his true work, signs of the truth of his claims about his Person and his mission. They were not his full and distinctive mission. Rather they were the means of

inviting us to absolute faith in him. The overwhelming number of evils in the world at the time our Lord lived remained untouched by him — the sicknesses, the deaths, the wars, the tyrannies. Rather, he attacked and broke up the root of the world's evils — sin. This is what he came to take away.

When we experience evils of one kind or another we ought, yes, go to our Lord and ask him persistently and with faith that he take away *that* evil. But for his own infinitely wise reasons he just may not do so — even though he certainly wants us to go to him with our burden. Christ's concern is above all with the root of evil, sin in our life and in the lives of all others. It is this evil which we must with his help uproot and replace with life, life in abundance, the life of Christ himself.



Saturday after the Epiphany

Entrance Antiphon Gal 4:4-5 God sent his Son, born of a woman, so that we might receive adoption as children.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who through your Only Begotten Son have made us a new creation for yourself, grant, we pray, that by your grace we may be found in the likeness of him, in whom our nature is united to you. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 John 5:14-21; Psalm 149:1-6a and 9b;
John 3:22-30

After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptised. Now John also was baptising at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were constantly coming to be baptised. (This was before John was put in prison.) An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of

ceremonial washing. They came to John and said to him, Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan - the one you testified about - well, he is baptising, and everyone is going to him. To this John replied, A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.' The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less. (John 3: 22-30)

Messiah and Bridegroom The octave of the Epiphany — the immediate aftermath of the Epiphany — celebrates the *manifestation* of Jesus Christ, commencing in his infancy, but taken up again with the start of his public ministry. The circumstances of his manifestation at the beginning of his public ministry are somewhat unique in the Scriptures. We have a great prophet declaring the presence among the people of a much greater prophet, and

then identifying him. There are many prophets whose teachings are included in the Hebrew Scriptures. The patriarch Abraham may be regarded as “a prophet,” and there are Moses, Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezechiel, and several so-called “minor” prophets. Generally they stand in isolation from one another, with the exception of Elijah and Elisha, his disciple and successor. Elijah ends his prophetic course and is taken from the scene, and, with his mantle, Elisha *succeeds* him. We could say that this is the nearest parallel in the past to the *connection* between John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. In John and Jesus we have two great prophets, acknowledged as such by the people and deeply connected with one another, as were Elijah and Elisha. Even though Elisha received a double portion of the spirit of Elijah, he did not eclipse Elijah — indeed, Elijah may be said to have remained the iconic instance of the prophetic tradition. It was he after all who, with Moses, appeared with our Lord at the Transfiguration. But John the Baptist pointed to Jesus Christ as the one who would eclipse him in prophetic

importance. John was counted as a great prophet by the people, and this was confirmed even the more by Jesus Christ, who said of him that a greater than he had not been born of woman. But John said that he himself was not worthy so much as to untie the sandal straps of Jesus Christ. Elijah did not say this of Elisha. As we read in our Gospel passage today, John said that “*he must become greater; I must become less*” (John 3:30). Indeed, John’s entire ministry was ultimately oriented towards preparing the people to receive Jesus of Nazareth worthily, for he was the Messiah. There is no circumstance quite like this in the prophetic tradition of God’s chosen people.

John was himself “a manifestation,” an “epiphany,” we might say. But the whole point of his being manifested as a prophet for the people was that Jesus of Nazareth might be manifested the more. In our Gospel passage today (John 3: 22-30), John says several things. Firstly, he acknowledges himself to have received a prophetic mission from above. “*A man can receive only what is given him from heaven.*” He never claimed, despite all that was

reputed of him, to be the Messiah. Indeed, he specifically denied that he was. “*You yourselves can testify that I said, ‘I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.’*” His mission was to go ahead of the Messiah. His was a momentous mission because it was for this that the history of God’s chosen people had been heading. It was to the Messiah that so much of the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms alluded — as our Lord himself would repeatedly state. Further, John is implying in this particular context — in which his disciples refer to “*the man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan, the one you testified about*” — that Jesus is the Messiah himself. In John’s testimony to his disciples, Jesus Christ is once again being manifested as the Messiah. But there is more, and it is scripturally very rich indeed. John refers to Jesus as the “*Bridegroom*,” and to himself as the Bridegroom’s friend. How John must have been consoled in thinking of himself as the Bridegroom’s “friend”! Perhaps he thought also of the years of his growing up, knowing his holy relative in Nazareth, meeting him occasionally, and with his singular

perception divining the incomparable holiness of Jesus, the son of Mary, his mother's kinswoman. But more than anything, he had received a revelation that declared to him that Jesus was the Messiah — and so he saw himself as “*friend*” to him who was the “*Bridegroom*.” In the words of John, the Messiah was “*Bridegroom*” to God's people — and our Lord himself would use this term to describe himself. John may have perceived that Jesus was the “*Bridegroom*” at his baptism, as a result of the Father's revelation of Jesus as his “*beloved Son*.” Wondrously, the “*Bridegroom*” was, in the prophets, Yahweh God himself.

Let us ponder these grand titles of Jesus Christ, as John prophetically uses them of him. Let us make our own the attitude and spirit of John the Baptist, who looked on himself as but a herald, a voice, one who pointed to Jesus Christ. He was unworthy even of undoing his very sandals. There is a simple and profound humility here, together with a powerful witness. Let us strive to be like that in our everyday lives, filling up our days with an authentic

witness to Jesus Christ, the Messiah and the Bridegroom of God's people.

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Second reflection: (John 3:22-30)

Christ the Bridegroom John the Evangelist had been a disciple of John the Baptist, and he tells us in this Gospel passage (John 3: 22 30) how his spiritual master viewed Jesus and his arrival on the scene. Jesus is the Bridegroom: *“The bride is only for the bridegroom; and yet the bridegroom’s friend who stands there and listens is glad when he hears the bridegroom’s voice. This same joy I feel, and now it is complete. He must grow greater, I must grow smaller.”* Jesus was the Bridegroom, the people of Israel the bride. He himself was only the friend of the Bridegroom. John’s words bespeak the greatness of Jesus and the humility of John. The Old Testament prophets spoke of God being the Bridegroom of the people, the people’s Husband. Our Lord would refer to himself as the Bridegroom and his disciples as the Bridegroom’s

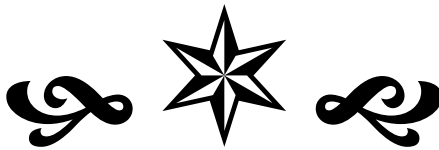
attendants. St Paul would refer to Christ as the Bridegroom of the Church, and to marriage as a Sacrament of Christ and his Church.

Christ is the Bridegroom. He is our All, the object of our love and our life, both individually and as the Church. Let us give ourselves to him unreservedly. Our heart ought belong to him in everything we do, as to God, for he is indeed God. Let us live out this fidelity in the little ordinary duties of everyday life, thus making of our ordinary lives something truly grand.





The Season of Lent



Ash Wednesday

Entrance Antiphon Wisdom 11:24, 25, 27. You are merciful to all, O Lord, and despise nothing that you have made. You overlook people's sins, to bring them to repentance, and you spare them, for you are the Lord our God.

Collect Grant, O Lord, that we may begin with holy fasting this campaign of Christian service, so that, as we take up battle against spiritual evils, we may be armed with weapons of self-restraint. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Joel 2:12-18; Psalm 51:3-6ab, 12-13, 14 and 17; 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Take heed that you do not perform your justice before men in order to be seen by them. Otherwise you will not receive a reward from your Father who is in heaven. Therefore when you give alms do not have a trumpet sound

before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets in order that they may be honoured by men. Amen I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms let not your left hand know what your right hand is doing. In this way your alms may be in secret and thy Father who sees in secret will repay you. When you pray do not be like the hypocrites who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and corners of the streets in order that they may be seen by men. Amen I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and having shut the door pray to your Father in secret: and your Father who sees in secret will repay you. And when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, sad. They disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Amen I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast anoint your head and wash your face in order that you will not appear to men to be fasting but only to your Father who is in secret. Your Father who sees in secret will repay you. (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18)

For God alone

We read in the Gospels of how, on occasion, our Lord would spend the whole night in prayer to God, and this followed an intense day of work in his public ministry. On other occasions he would rise very early and leave the dwelling to go out and spend the early hours in prayer. On one such occasion Peter went searching for him and, when he found him, told him that the people were looking for him. When he was baptized in the river Jordan and the Spirit of God descended on him in the form of a dove, our Lord was led by the Spirit into the desert where he spent forty days in prayer and fasting, being tempted by Satan. On other occasions at the end of an intense day of work with his disciples, our Lord led them off to be by themselves to rest awhile — to rest with Jesus and with God. There is something fundamental about this pattern of going aside from normal activity in order to rest and be with God. One of the Ten Commandments specifies that at the end of the working week, a day is to be set aside as the Sabbath. It is the Lord's Day when God becomes the object of man's

attention, and man takes a religious rest. In the account of creation as depicted in the first chapter of Genesis, God works for a week, then he rests. The account sets an inspired paradigm for all of man's working life. We are to interrupt our activities by giving time to God and to rest. Christ himself practised this, and he had his disciples observe this pattern too. This has many purposes, but one is to enable us to renew our relationship with God and to purify our motivation for all that we do. The fact is that we must guard our hearts against their becoming attached to many things other than God, in the hurly-burly of daily life. A mixed motivation can enter the most sacred and best of activities, including the specific works of religion. I am thinking of prayer, fasting (self-denial) and works of mercy and charity. These most laudable activities can become corrupted in their motivation. That is, we can do them for our own glory, rather than for God's. We must guard against this by regularly and often going into our "secret room" and renewing our love for and service of God.

Our Lord roundly criticised some (though not all) of the religious leaders for being whitewashed tombs. They were hypocrites, making a show of their religious practice in order to retain the respect of men. *“Take heed that you do not perform your justice before men in order to be seen by them. Otherwise you will not receive a reward from your Father who is in heaven.”* In our Gospel today (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18), our Lord commands the utmost purity of motive, and he brings home his point by vivid images. Incidentally, we notice how he isolates three features of religion: almsgiving, fasting, and prayer. These are the pillars — and we ought examine our lives to see if all three are in place. For instance, we may regularly pray. The habit of prayer could be well established in our life. But what of fasting (i.e., self-denial) and almsgiving? Do we give to those in need? Alternatively, we may be generous in giving alms to the poor, but how good is our life of prayer? We may even recognize our serious deficiencies in one or other of these two great areas of religious living, but then fail to do anything much about it.

Thus the situation remains unchanged year after year, indeed to the end of life. We must institute in our plan of living a regular examination of conscience in which we survey the field, so that the weeds are noticed and uprooted. That having been said, what our Lord is insisting on in our Gospel passage today is that these basic actions of religion be done for love of God and not for love of self. If we don't look sharp, the love of self will creep into the good things we are doing. I remember when I was young, just starting out in preparing for the priesthood, the priest responsible for our spiritual preparation warned against the insidious presence of "human respect." He was referring to the fear of the bad opinion of the world and of worldly persons. This fear may lead a person away from religious practice. Our Lord here is referring to that "human respect" which leads a person to religious practice in order to gain admiration. We may find ourselves seeking or enjoying a little too much the esteem of others, and even when we are aware of this, we may find it very hard to

break radically from it. As our Lord says, this esteem of others will be our reward.

One of the signs of the authentic character of the Gospel accounts is the frequent presence of hyperbole in our Lord's teaching. He speaks in this particular everyday idiom to drive home his points. It was the vernacular of the day, and a further sign of the reality of the Incarnation. Our Lord said it was better to tear out one's eye if it led to sin, rather than to go to Hell with two eyes. Our Lord was not suggesting self-mutilation. In our Gospel passage today, our Lord directs that when you give alms, your left hand must not know what your right hand is doing. So too, *"when you pray, go into your room and having shut the door pray to your Father in secret: and your Father who sees in secret will repay you."* Let us enter into the spirit of Lent by resolving to turn aside with Christ, and, *"in secret"* with him, renew the true motive of all we do: the love and service of him alone.



Thursday after Ash Wednesday

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 55 (54):17-20, 23 When I cried to the Lord, he heard my voice; he rescued me from those who attack me. Entrust your cares to the Lord, and he will support you.

Collect Prompt our actions with your inspiration, we pray, O Lord, and further them with your constant help, that all we do may always begin from you and by you be brought to completion. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 1:1-4, 6;
Luke 9:22-25

Jesus said to his disciples: “The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes and be put to death, and on the third day rise again.” He said to all, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and

follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it and the one who loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his very self? ” (Luke 9:22-25)

Really want it! It is well known that while St Thomas Aquinas puts the intellect and knowing at the forefront of his account of man, St Bonaventure — his Franciscan contemporary and friend — gives primary emphasis to the will and love. Of course, we are speaking here merely of emphasis, and to exclude a due place for the will in St Thomas would be ridiculous. For instance, he puts great emphasis on the assent of the will in his definition of faith. Unfortunately I have never had the time to read or study St Bonaventure with care, but I do think that the emphasis on the *will* deserves very careful attention. For instance, what we *want*, whether this is the result of full deliberation or not, has a great impact on how and what we *think*. John Henry Newman insisted that our religious views and positions do not depend just on rational processes. They depend also on our hidden starting points,

our basic preferences, our fundamental choices. A good man will think differently on subjects moral and religious than will a bad man. What he considers and sees to be probable will depend in large measure on what he *wants*. To a great degree, our life, including what we think, will depend on the bent and choice of our *will*. It is for this reason that we shall be held accountable for our convictions and beliefs. Now, of course the greatest issue in life is the call to goodness which arises from the depths of our conscience, and which is confirmed and elevated by the call of Christ to holiness in friendship with him. *From before the world began*, St Paul writes, *God chose us in Christ to be holy and full of love in his sight*. This is the issue before each and all of us, but on what does it depend? It depends on our *will*. Indeed — referring back to St Thomas Aquinas again — it is said that the sister of St Thomas asked her illustrious brother how one can become a saint. Excellent question! It is the question of the ages. Her brother gave a very simple answer: Really *want* it! Do we *really* want this? Of course we would all like to be good

and holy, but all too often we *want* other things more. We would like to be holy, but we don't really want it because of the effort it entails. Anything worthwhile costs, and the question is, while we may like to have that thing, are we prepared to pay the cost? Do we have a *great desire* for it? That is the test as to what we want.

In our Gospel passage today (Luke 9:22-25), our Lord tells us what being his disciple entails. “*If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it and the one who loses his life for my sake will save it*” (Luke 9:22-25). As baptized Christians we may look into our hearts and discover ambivalence there in respect to the following of Jesus Christ. We want to be his true friends to the very end, but there is another tug going on in our hearts. We instinctively hesitate before the cost and find within us an inveterate *reluctance* when it comes to action. We would love to be generous, but, paradoxically, we find that we do not want to be. Well, let us begin with what we have! We want to be generous

disciples of Jesus Christ, and we know that we believe in him and love him — even if only to a point. Let us begin there, then! On one occasion our Lord was asked by a distraught father that he release his son from his possession by a demon. Our Lord questioned the extent of his faith. The man replied, *Lord, I do believe — help my unbelief.* We too believe. We love, and we desire to follow our Lord generously. Let us profess this in the presence of Jesus Christ, thanking him for the gift of this faith and love such as it is — all the while asking that it be augmented the more by his grace. St Josemaria Escriva, in his book of short statements entitled *The Forge*, gives us a brief prayer. It is “*Make me into a saint, my God, even if you have to beat me into it. I don’t want to be a hindrance to your Will. I want to respond, I want to be generous.*” But then he adds the critical question: “*But what sort of wanting is mine?*” (No.391). Well, our “wanting” may be very limited indeed, but at least we have something to start with, and this is the gift of grace. Count on the grace of God, then! In another similar book by the same author, indeed

his first spiritual book of maxims, he speaks of failure. He writes, “*So you have failed? You — be convinced of it — cannot fail. You haven’t failed, you have gained experience. On you go!*” (*The Way*, no.405). The saint is always relying on the grace of God, and always starting again.

There is a famous prayer in the *Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola*. It is a prayer of self-oblation, in which the one doing the *Spiritual Exercises* entrusts himself to God. He invites the Lord to take everything he wishes — but to give two things in return. *Give me*, he prays, *your love and your grace!* Let us pray for the gift of a deeper and deeper love for God, and for more and more of God’s grace, empowering us to be generous in the living of this love. For our part, let us strive to be faithful to the light and the grace we are granted, for as John Henry Newman says in one of his sermons, if we are faithful to the grace of God, more will be granted us.

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Second reflection: (Luke 9:22-25)

Taking up our daily cross It is a God-given instinct, inherent in our nature, to avoid suffering and to draw back from whatever might harm us. We avoid allowing ourselves to be burnt by fire, or to be placed in other dangerous situations. They cause pain, and pain is the protective alarm system drawing us back from suffering in order to protect us. The animals have this instinct, and some plants show evidence of something like it. But like every natural tendency in the case of man, it must be guided by reason (and faith) towards what is in our best interest. Our Lord tells us that if we want to be a follower of his, we must renounce ourselves and take up our cross every day and follow him (Luke 9:22-25). So the acceptance of hardship in the following of our Lord is an indispensable element of being his disciple. It is natural that we tend to avoid the difficulties that are part of this course. But our Lord says that if we give in to this tendency we cannot be his disciples.

Lent is a time of grace and opportunity in making a start in self-renunciation. The tendency will be to avoid the cross inherent in daily life. That cross is, more often than not, the self-renunciation involved in our daily duties. This is the one great thing that is necessary if we are to follow our Lord to sanctity. So let's make a start in practical and attainable ways during Lent.



Friday after Ash Wednesday

Entrance Antiphon Ps 30 (29):11 The Lord heard and had mercy on me; the Lord became my helper.

Collect Show gracious favour, O Lord, we pray, to the works of penance we have begun, that we may have strength to accomplish with sincerity the bodily observances we undertake. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 58:1-9; Psalm 51:3-6ab, 18-19;
Matthew 9:14-15

Then John's disciples came and asked him, How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast? Jesus answered, How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast. (Matthew 9:14-15)

The Bridegroom If one thing is clear, it is that generally man believes in a higher, unseen world. There is an enormous variety of ways in which the unseen world is imagined in the religions of man, with a great range of images of the deities. Commonly the other world is imagined as populated by numerous gods — which is to say, deities who exercise some independent authority over this or that feature of the world. The gods do not seem to “create,” rather they influence and shape. Strict “creation” is very rare. The world is perceived as being under the influence of these higher beings, all of whom are limited in every respect, including their power. The highest god is limited in power by lower deities, and usually religious devotees deal with these many lower ones. This polytheism was characteristic of high civilizations such as Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece and Rome, as it was and is of the numerous traditional and primal societies. It reflects our human experience — our world is made up of numerous sources of influence, and the notion of but one ruler guiding all things (let alone creating them) would

normally boggle both imagination and intellect. This is the reason why the Hebrew religion stands out so prominently in the ancient world. It allowed there to be *but one God*. By way of aside as to the monotheism of Israel, there is an academic dispute as to whether historically the revealed religion of the Hebrews was understood from the very first to declare that no other deities even so much as existed. There are those who maintain that at the beginning, the strict command was that the one and only God of the Hebrews was to be Yahweh Lord. The matter of the deities of other peoples was left to one side. According to this theory, formal monotheism, stating that there is in fact only one God and that all other so-called “deities” are but phantoms, angelic messengers or demons with no independent power, emerged as a gradual realization. Strict monotheism was implicit in the revelation, but realized only gradually. It is also disputed as to what God’s work of “creation” meant in the beginning — some maintaining that the notion of “creation from nothing” was realized but gradually too. That said, whatever of such

theories, historical revelation declares the dogma that there is but one Creator of all things, seen and unseen.

This is a striking doctrine, and to say the least it certainly simplifies life and our conception of the world. To begin with, if all is in the hands of but one Creator who not only guides all things but creates and sustains them in existence, then it allows for consistent laws. The laws of the world can be studied and mastered. The world is not the plaything of arbitrary and fickle deities. But there is a further wondrous feature about the one God of revelation — it concerns the relationship he has with the world. One of the notable issues in the philosophy of religion going back to the Greeks is the balance between the transcendence of God and his immanence in the world. It seems to me that the best classical philosophy tended to stress the transcendence of the First Cause and the Prime Act. Consequently, God was distant, and conveyed the image of a principle rather than a living Person. The revealed religion of the Hebrews, though, stressed God's closeness to his people. He, a living Person above and

beyond all things, chose a people for his own. He was with them. There was a special covenant between him and his people. Those who were privileged to be members of this chosen people had the Lord for their God, the Lord who was almighty and who loved them and would save them. He lived with them as their God — and certain places could be pointed to as the locale of his presence. Such was the Temple, for instance. But to say all this is not really to do it sufficient justice. The God of the Hebrews spoke of himself and his relationship with his people in daring and astonishing images. Most notably, he was Bridegroom and Husband to his people, and they were his spouse. To turn to other gods was being unfaithful to their Husband. More than this, holiness of life and the observance of revealed morality was to be conceived by the people in terms of their spousal relationship with their God. Hence we find our Lord referring to moral failures, such as the hostile or merely curious seeking from him of signs as proof of his claims, as acts of an adulterous generation. But most

remarkable of all, we see Christ appropriating for himself this title of Bridegroom. He, now, is the Bridegroom.

Yes, in our Gospel today (Matthew 9:14-15), our Lord speaks of himself as the Bridegroom. His disciples are the special guests of the Bridegroom, his friends. They are present at the wedding, which of course begins with the complete self-oblation by Christ of himself for the sake of mankind. It is the first great token of the wedding-feast of heaven. By this self-oblation, consummated on the Cross at Calvary and the gift of his Spirit issuing from it, Christ becomes irrevocably united with his spouse the Church, and this union brings life to the world. This is an enthralling image of our relationship with God in Christ, and it comes from the lips of our Lord himself. Let us resolve so to live as to make it the heart and soul of our daily lives. Christ is the Bridegroom of our souls.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 9:14-15)

The Bridegroom is taken away One of the most beautiful and striking images that Yahweh God uses of himself in the Old Testament is that of the Husband or Bridegroom. I remember when first told by one scripture scholar that in his opinion the very meaning of the word Yahweh is akin to Bridegroom. God is the Husband or Bridegroom, and Israel is his Spouse. The bond was meant to be unbreakable. Because Israel did in fact break this bond repeatedly, God promised and brought about a new covenant. In this new covenant Christ is the Bridegroom. St John the Baptist described our Lord at the beginning of his public ministry as the Bridegroom, and himself as the Bridegroom's attendant. And now, here in our Gospel passage today (Matthew 9:14-15) our Lord describes himself as the Bridegroom, and his disciples as the guests. Christ, then, occupies the place of Yahweh in the new covenant between God and his people.

However, the Bridegroom has been taken away from us in the sense that he is no longer directly visible to the senses. So our hearts can the more easily be led astray and we can forget the Bridegroom of our souls. We must then fast in the sense of denying ourselves those things that are taking us away from full union with our Bridegroom. Let us use Lent to make a real start in the self-denial that should characterise the life of the authentic Christian who aspires to sanctity.



Saturday after Ash Wednesday

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 69 (68):17 Answer us, Lord, for your mercy is kind; in the abundance of your mercies, look upon us.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, look with compassion on our weakness and ensure us your protection by stretching forth the right hand of your majesty. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 58:9-14; Psalm 86:1-2, 3-4, 5-6;
Luke 5:27-32

After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. Follow me, Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him. Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law

who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and ‘sinners’? Jesus answered them, It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. (Luke 5: 27-32)

Doctor to the sick In each of the Synoptic Gospels — Matthew, Mark and Luke — our incident today follows on Christ’s forgiveness of the sins of the paralytic who was lowered from the roof before him. This suggests a common source, or at least that the authors of these three Gospels were making a point of harmonizing with the accounts of the others. As usual, though, there are differences. Let us notice some of them. In Luke’s account in today’s passage, the call of Levi the tax collector occurs when our Lord leaves the house where he had cured the paralytic and forgiven his sins. In Mark (2:13-17), the incident is situated after mention of our Lord’s going from the house to the seaside where he taught the crowds — the seaside is not mentioned in Luke and Matthew (Matthew 9: 9-13). In both Mark and Matthew, Levi, having heard the

invitation of our Lord to follow him, rises up and follows him. But Luke, as if to emphasize Levi's abandonment of everything for the sake of Jesus Christ, adds the detail that, "*leaving all things,*" he rose and followed him. Levi the despised tax-collector, was, then, whole-hearted in his response. While Mark and Matthew simply say that "*our Lord reclined at Levi's house*" (to dine), Luke, as if to emphasize the action of Levi, writes that "*Levi made a great feast for him in his house.*" Matthew and Mark tell us that "*many tax collectors and sinners reclined at table with Jesus and his disciples,*" with Mark adding the detail that "*there were many, and they followed him.*" Luke calls it a "*great crowd of tax-collectors and others*" who sat down with them — stressing even more, it would seem, the great number of those deemed despicable who were in Jesus' company on this occasion. Reading between the lines, then, in our Gospel today Luke brings out especially *the response of Levi* the tax-collector to the call of Jesus. All three give us in virtually identical terms our Lord's answer to the objection of the scribes and Pharisees at his

association with sinners. He is there as physician to the sick, leading them to repentance. Characteristically, in Matthew our Lord also quotes from the Scriptures.

Our Lord, then, dined with the tax-collectors and sinners as their physician with a view to reclaiming them from sin. Let us notice that some two chapters after this episode of today, St Luke tells us that our Lord inveighed against those who said of John the Baptist that he was a “devil” for his extreme fasting — and of Jesus that he was “*a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of publicans and sinners.*” Clearly, our Lord is responding again to the criticism of the scribes and Pharisees of his readiness to eat and drink with “*publicans and sinners*” (Luke 7: 34). But here in this very chapter we notice that immediately after, “*one of the Pharisees invited him to dine with him.*” So Jesus “*entered the house of the Pharisee and reclined*” at table. Why did our Lord take up this invitation, as he had taken up the earlier invitation of Levi, and the tax-collectors and sinners? As with the tax-collectors, he went to dine with the Pharisees as the physician of souls,

the doctor of the sick, to lead them to repentance. Once he was at table, “a sinner” came looking for him, but of course the “sinner” was not one of the Pharisees. It was, we read, *“a woman who was in the town, a sinner, who heard that Jesus was at table in the house of the Pharisee.”* She came to do him honour, bringing an alabaster jar of ointment. There she stood at his feet, weeping because of her sins and her knowledge of his compassion. She began to wash his feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. The Pharisee — as on the previous occasion when they observed him dining with the tax-collectors and sinners — was critical of him for his permitting this contact with a sinner. *“If he were a prophet,”* he thought, he would have known that this woman is a sinner. Our Lord proceeded to contrast the love and the humility of the sinful woman with the discourtesy and pride of the Pharisee. Then he forgave the woman her sins. He was there as the physician to the sick, leading them to repentance. He succeeded with the sinful woman, while failing with the Pharisee. Can we not expect that the sinful woman became a true disciple, as

might have many of the tax-collectors with whom our Lord had dined earlier?

The tax-collectors who dined with our Lord and who were among his followers had a lively sense of personal sin, as did the woman in the later episode. The scribes and Pharisees who objected to our Lord's associating with tax-collectors had little or no sense of sin. The doctor can only help if the sick person is open to that help. The problem is acute when the sick person thinks he is perfectly well — and that was the situation with the Pharisees. Let us pray for a vivid realization of our true condition, and then turn to Christ for all that we need to pass from sickness to health, from death to life, and from separation from God to union with him.

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Second reflection: (Luke 5:27-32)

Leaving all The great and ever pressing issue of each day is the call of God to each of us that we be saints,

hidden, known as such only to God, but saints nevertheless. It means loving God with all our heart, expressing this love in the generous fulfilment of our daily duties, and being prepared to struggle to the utmost to bring this about — with the grace of God. Now why is it that all too often we make so little progress? It is because we do not do what St Matthew did when our Lord said to him, “*Follow me.*” Matthew *left everything and followed him.* That disposition to leave all was what our Lord wanted. Seeing in Matthew that readiness to respond to his call immediately, our Lord could lead Matthew on to sanctity. By contrast, consider the rich young man. He came to our Lord and asked what he had to do to gain eternal life. Our Lord invited him to follow him. But *he went away sad.*

Let us leave behind what is preventing us from a total following of the Master each day. In this lies the grandeur of ordinary life. Let what we see in Matthew’s response to our Lord’s call be the pattern of our lives.



First Sunday of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 91 (90):15-16 When he calls on me, I will answer him; I will deliver him and give him glory, I will grant him length of days.

Collect Grant, almighty God, through the yearly observances of holy Lent, that we may grow in understanding of the riches hidden in Christ and by worthy conduct pursue their effects. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Genesis 2:7-9; 3:1-7; Psalm 51:3-4, 5 6, 12-13, 17; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11

Jesus was then led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the Devil. When he had fasted forty days and forty nights he was hungry. The Tempter coming said to him, "If you are the Son of God command that these stones become bread." He answered and said, "It is written, not in bread alone does man live but in every word that

proceeds from the mouth of God.” Then the Devil took him up into the holy city and set him upon the pinnacle of the temple, and he said to him, “If you are the Son of God, cast yourself down, for it is written that he has given his angels charge over you and in their hands shall they bear you up, lest perhaps you dash your foot against a stone.” Jesus said to him, “It is written again, You shall not tempt the Lord your God.” Again the Devil took him up a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them. He said to him, “All these will I give you, if falling down you adore me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Begone Satan, for it is written, The Lord your God will you adore, and him only will you serve.” Then the Devil left him, and behold angels came and ministered to him. (Matthew 4:1-11)

Christ and Satan When the Christian peruses the pages of the Old Testament, it is very striking to him how meagre are the references to Satan — the Devil. Satan (*ha-satan*, meaning “accuser” or slanderer — understood as the Fiend, in the sense of Devil or *diábolos*), is rarely

mentioned in the Old Testament. So obvious is this, that T.J. Wray and Gregory Mobley in their book (*The Birth of Satan*, 2005, p.52) go to the excess of claiming that “The Satan of later imagination is absent in the Hebrew Bible.” Not true. Satan is indeed present there, although references are sparse. By contrast, in the New Testament, “Satan” (*satana*) occurs more than 30 times in passages alongside *diábolos* (referring to Satan). However, despite this paucity of references, there is in the Old Testament one striking depiction of the Enemy. I refer to the beginning of Genesis. Although the “Satan” who is occasionally mentioned in the Old Testament is not formally identified with the Serpent of the beginning of Genesis, it is plain that the two are the same. If we compare the few references to Satan in the Old Testament with the intervention of the Serpent at the beginning of the Book of Genesis, the Serpent of Genesis looms more ominously and devastatingly than does “Satan” in the other books. The Serpent of Genesis represents, it seems to me, a great advance in the sparse Old Testament revelation about the

Devil. The inspired compiler of the second account of the Creation (chapters 2-3) places the action and words of the Serpent at the beginning of the whole story of God and his people. His action in tempting man to rebel against God is shown as a fundamental factor in the appearance of evil in the world. All was well till the Serpent spoke. While “Satan” in, say, the Book of Job speaks to God in slanderous fashion about Job the just man, in Genesis the Serpent is not in the presence of God at all. It is about God that he lies, when he talks to the woman. He then tempts her to be another god (the besetting temptation of ancient rulers) — “like gods.” He prompts her to disobey God, because, he suggests, God is depriving her of something good. Satan is God’s enemy and does not acknowledge his lordship. He draws the woman, and through her the man, into his own stand against God, and in doing so he subtly enters their life as Master. His defeat is soon announced, but the whole scene is a remarkable teaching. The Serpent approached man, and won a signal victory.

Ages pass, and another Beginning is launched, the one promised at the first beginning. It will be a new creation, and there in the wilderness stands a new Man. While in the Garden the man and the woman had been surrounded with plenty, this new Man has been fasting and was starving. Ah! the Tempter again appears on the scene, and once again his function is to tempt away from God. In our Gospel passage today (Matthew 4:1-11), he is the *diabolos*, the “devil” — and is addressed by Christ as “Satan.” Mark tells us that Christ was tempted by “Satan” — *satana*. Luke’s account refers to him as the “devil,” and to Christ as addressing him with the name of “Satan.” Because of the manifest *textual parallel* between the temptation of Christ and that of Eve, the *historical fact* of the temptations of Christ before the commencement of his public ministry serve also to suggest the *historical fact* of the temptation of our first parents in the beginning — quite apart from the account and inclusion of it having been inspired by God. The parallel is so marked, though the upshot so different. The Genesis account of the Temptation by the Serpent

stands out among the sparse references to Satan in the Old Testament, whereas the Temptation of Christ by Satan at the beginning of each of the three Synoptic Gospels is part of a piece. It marks the beginning of the presence of the demons wherever our Lord goes in his public ministry. The Temptation in the wilderness is not mentioned by John in his Gospel, nor does John have much mention of Christ's combat with the demons in his account of Christ's public ministry. John's concerns are different. But at the beginning of our Lord's ministry as narrated by *Matthew, Mark and Luke*, we are immediately reminded of what happened at the Beginning. With the rebellion of the first man and woman, the world fell into Satan's hands, and instantly his future defeat was proclaimed. We are reminded in the Gospel that Christ's work will effect this defeat, a defeat that begins from his first encounter with the Enemy. What a contrast with the Genesis scene! The tone of the Gospel is set. A great struggle has been joined, and the Enemy can surely see that his days are numbered. Our Champion is on the scene, armour donned, sword in hand,

and nothing will stop him. The armour and the sword are the nails and the Cross.

There are two Standards being held aloft. We must decide every day which is the one behind which we shall stand. The die is cast, and there is no turning back as far as God is concerned. His will be the victory, and Satan's the defeat. How strange that we continue to hold on to sin and its temptations! Let us be done with it! Let us work at disentangling our life from all that smacks of sin, no matter how minor. A small and harmless matter, is it? If it is sin, it is not harmless. It reeks with the smoke and stench and ugly clamour of hell. Let us be done with it, then, and take our stand with Jesus.



Monday of the First week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 123 (122):2-3 Like the eyes of slaves on the hand of their lords, so our eyes are on the Lord our God, till he show us his mercy. Have mercy on us, Lord, have mercy.

Collect Convert us, O God our Saviour, and instruct our minds by heavenly teaching, that we may benefit from the works of Lent. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Leviticus 19:1-2.11-18; Psalm 18;
Matthew 25:31-46

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will

say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick

and in prison and you did not look after me.’ They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life. (Matthew 25:31-46)

The Judge A good dictionary tells us the usual meanings of a word. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1964) states that the *conscience* is the moral sense of right and wrong, or, the consciousness that one’s actions are right or wrong. It is, then, the judgment of the mind on what is right and wrong in human action, and on one’s moral state as a consequence of one’s deliberate actions. If one knowingly does something unjust to someone else, one’s action is morally wrong, and one’s conscience judges one accordingly. A dictionary does not offer a philosophical definition of something. It simply attempts to define what most people mean by the word. On reflection, we can see that any deliberate action, any action

that is the fruit of free deliberation, any action that is truly my own and not just that proceeds from me and despite me, will have a moral value. Now, we may ask, in the main what actions do most people think of as being good or evil? I think that most people would consider that in the main their moral life revolves around what they *do to others*. If I do something good, I usually mean that I have done something good to others, and my conscience approves. If I do something evil, I usually mean that I have unjustly caused harm to others, and my conscience accuses me. Of course, I make distinctions. I can deliberately cause harm to others without it being unjust and therefore immoral. For instance, I may cause some harm to another in legitimate self-defence. I also know that not all wrong actions are actions that inflict harm on others. Many actions may harm only me, violating my dignity as a person and my best interests. It is immoral to take, without serious reason, heavy drugs. It is wrong of me to cultivate evil friendships. It is morally wrong to neglect my relationship with God. All that having been said, I think

that, rightly or wrongly, the instinct of most people is that the moral life is generally concerned with what we do to others. If a person devotes himself unstintingly to the welfare of others, his conscience will approve of what he has done. The conscience of others approves too, whereas it condemns the one who unjustly harms another.

It is an intriguing fact of experience that the conscience, as Shakespeare puts it in his *Hamlet*, makes *cowards* of us all. In the dictate of conscience there is a vague sense of an objective Lawgiver, and in the judgment of conscience there is a vague fear of an objective tribunal and Judge. We are not only ashamed of the wrong we do, but we *fear* for the future as a result. We seem to have an intimation of a future judgment, and this fear is contained in the feeling and judgment of conscience. However much many philosophers may discount this as a purely subjective feeling, it has held its own in human thought from time immemorial. In the judgment of conscience a man has an inkling of how he stands in an ultimate sense. Thus it is that we speak of conscience as being the voice, or the echo

of the voice, of *God* in both its dictate as to what is to be done, and in its judgment on one's moral state. If one has spent one's life in serving the needy, and has avoided causing harm to others, one will feel approved not only by one's conscience — but in some more ultimate sense as well. Cardinal Newman went so far as to call the conscience the “aboriginal vicar of Christ” (*Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*), which is to say that element in our nature which acts as Christ's representative. If it acts as Christ's representative, under what aspect is Christ represented by it? The Conscience acts as vicar of Christ *the Judge* — which brings us to our Gospel today. In our Gospel today (Matthew 25: 31-46), Christ reveals that at the end of time he will come again to *judge* the living and the dead, and all will be subject to his definitive *judgment*. This is contained in the very Creed. As a result of Christ's judgment, each person will either go to Heaven, or be condemned to Hell. Christ tells us another thing in his vivid description in today's Gospel. It is that much of the judgment will hinge on how we have treated *others*. Christ

does not teach that this is the only matter for God's judgment. For instance, in another part of the Gospel, our Lord says that the one who is ashamed of him and his teaching, of that person will he be ashamed in the presence of his heavenly Father (Luke 9: 26). Nevertheless, how we have treated others in their need is high on the agenda of our future judgment, and this, as I have been suggesting, is intimated to us by our conscience.

In our Gospel today our Lord sanctions the general testimony of the conscience that what we do to others has a profound moral importance, and in large measure determines our moral state. We might say that this testimony is the voice of Nature within us, and the voice of mankind external to us. It points to the word of the unseen Judge of all. That Judge is Jesus Christ, God become man, our Redeemer, our Brother and our God. We have a sentinel within, a messenger from on high implanted within the sanctuary of our hearts. That guardian is our conscience which, if functioning correctly and guided by right reason and revealed teaching, will point to the

supreme Judge. The day will assuredly come when, as he describes in the Gospel, he who is our Judge will consider whatever we have done to the least of his brothers.

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Second reflection (Matthew 25:31-46)

Loving Christ in those in need A very notable feature of many ancient religions, and of the traditional religions of primitive societies and peoples, is that the practices of religion are directed to the god or gods, with little concern, relatively speaking, for one's fellow man. The dictates of the religion are oriented to honouring and placating the gods. Now, of course in Revealed Religion both Old and New Testaments there are abundant elements that direct one to the honour and worship of God. This is the primary purpose of religion. It is God who must be honoured and loved above all else. But very obvious in Revealed Religion is the constant reference to justice and charity towards one's *neighbour*. Numerous passages from the Old Testament make it clear that as far as God is

concerned, he cannot be honoured and worshipped properly if one is failing in justice and charity towards one's neighbour in need. And our Gospel passage today presents the judgment of God as being dominated by this very issue. Our Lord tells us that at our judgment and at the General Judgment in particular, we will be told that our neglect of the one in need has been counted as a culpable neglect of Christ himself. *"I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me"* (Matthew 25:31-46). The upshot will be solemn and eternal: *"And they will go away to eternal punishment, and the virtuous to eternal life"* (Matthew 25:46).

Lent is the time of grace and opportunity to make a real step ahead in our spiritual life. Let us resolve, this Lent, to rediscover Christ in our neighbour, especially in our needy neighbour. It is because of this (i.e., Christ being in the needy) that love for the needy will sanctify us.



Tuesday of the First week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 90 (89):1-2 O Lord, you have been our refuge, from generation to generation; from age to age, you are.

Collect Look upon your family, Lord, that, through the chastening effects of bodily discipline, our minds may be radiant in your presence with the strength of our yearning for you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 55:10-11; Psalm 34:4-7, 16-19;
Matthew 6:7-15

Jesus said to his disciples, When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be

done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.’ For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matthew 6:7-15)

Forgive! It is impossible not to be hurt during life, whatever be one’s circumstances. There are so many wheels turning within the system of the world, so many shifts in various directions by the multitudinous variety of forces in the universe, that collisions cannot be avoided. In one sense or another, one will be bumped, pushed, hit, pinched, struck — and so, be hurt. In turn, one will bump and strike *others*, and *they* will be hurt too. Unless one were to expect the Creator to alter the vast course of the world moment by moment so that there is an abiding protection against all collision, in a world run by laws given to it and sustained by the Creator it is impossible to avoid injury in some sense. One is born and one lives at a

certain point in history and in a certain locality. This means, to begin with, that one's path will cross that of certain others who have their faults and temperament. Hurt and injury will result, and for all parties to a greater or lesser extent. Thus it is inconceivable and virtually unimaginable that life will not bring its hurts, and those hurts could be major. So one must be somewhat philosophical about life's injuries — even somewhat “fatalistic,” knowing that this will happen. It may be the case of a person of immense talent and religious faith. He shows promise of doing great good, yet is thwarted time and again in his plans and hopes. He is misunderstood and maligned. He finds himself required to spend his time and energies in trivialities not of his making. He experiences a profound sense of the injustice of his situation, and friendly observers would agree with him. He passes the course of his life not being able to do anything like the degree of good he could have done, and very largely because of the obstacles placed in his way by others who are, as a matter of fact, good people in their turn. His temptation is to be

bitter and aggrieved, and yet he is an exceptionally good person. In his spiritual maturity, he resists this temptation while protesting against the injustice he experiences. He knows he has suffered injustice, but he is not unforgiving. He understands that others who have hurt him are themselves subject to their many limitations. In any case, he puts his life in the hands of God who knows all and who guides the course of history to its proper end.

What I am saying is that no-one ought be surprised if his life has involved a trail of hurts, for whatever reason. No-one ought be surprised if he finds that he has a problem with bitterness against this or that person or turn of events. As I said, he ought be somewhat philosophical about it, even somewhat “fatalistic” — in that injuries are to be expected. He knows, of course, that all is in the hands of a loving Creator. Now, what must *not* happen is the *next* possible step. In their hearts people are, because of their hurts, commonly *unforgiving*. It is herein that life’s major challenge lies. What each person faces is the option of being forgiving or not. In a great many cases, people do

not *want* to forgive. So strong is this *desire* not to forgive that they think they cannot forgive. I cannot forgive this! This may be so, but at root it is because they *do not want* to forgive. It is certainly one of the greatest tasks and challenges of life, and if it is met, it is one of life's greatest achievements. Consider the person who has absolutely forgiven everyone who in any sense hurt him, together with every situation that has caused hurt! Some would ask, How could he have done it? At root, it was because of personal decisions, acts of the *will* that express the core of the subject who does the forgiving. To forgive is a magnificent achievement. It is a deeply personal act, and not just the result of personal temperament. But now, in speaking of forgiveness we are not just talking here of a beautiful moral picture that might occur to us in some sort of reverie. We are speaking of what our best conscience requires, and more importantly of what Jesus Christ demands of us. If we are going to have anything to do with Jesus Christ, we shall be immediately confronted with his *demand* that we forgive to the very end. We are to forgive

from the heart not just seven times, but seventy-seven times. Furthermore, Christ lays this down as a *command* that carries severe *sanctions* — “*that is how my heavenly Father will deal with you unless you each forgive your brother from your heart*” (Matthew 18: 35). He tells us that the amount we measure out is the amount that will be given us (Luke 6: 38). This brings us to our Gospel today (Matthew 6:7-15).

In our Gospel today our Lord teaches us about prayer and gives us a prayer. An instruction on simplicity in prayer introduces it — for the Lord’s Prayer is strikingly simple. An instruction on forgiveness ends the prayer — for in the Lord’s Prayer we ask God for pardon, and we promise to pardon in our turn. Ask yourself this: how often in your prayer are you struggling with a refusal to forgive? Take it from our Lord — good prayer and the resolve to forgive go hand-in-hand. If we want to grow in prayer, pray for a growth in forgiveness. Difficult is it? Ah yes, indeed. But as our Lord said elsewhere, for man it is impossible, but *all things* are possible for God. So ask

constantly for the grace to forgive, all the while resolving, as a genuine act of the will, truly to forgive.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 6:7-15)

Forgiving others St Alphonsus Liguori says somewhere that it is impossible to be saved if we do not pray. So we ought to have the utmost appreciation for any teaching coming from our Lord himself on how we are to pray. All too often we simply take for granted the prayer he himself taught us in response to the request that he teach his disciples to pray: the Lord's Prayer. Let us treasure the Lord's Prayer, pondering deeply on its parts, allowing it to shape and inform our own life of prayer. Let us especially during Lent notice and take to heart *one* detail in this most admirable of prayers. Christian prayer includes the constant request to God for *forgiveness*. Anyone with a sense of sin will do this, and it has to be an essential element of Lent. But our Lord says that if we hope to be

forgiven by God, we must be prepared to *forgive others* in our turn.

Let us pray for the grace to forgive others. Let us forgive, and forgive and forgive. Imagine if we reach the point by the end of our lives of going to God having forgiven *everyone* for everything. “*Yes, if you forgive others their failings, your heavenly Father will forgive you yours; but if you do not forgive others, your Father will not forgive your failings either*” (Matthew 6:15).



Wednesday of the First week in Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 90 (89):1-2 O Lord, you have been our refuge, from generation to generation; from age to age, you are.

Collect Look upon your family, Lord, that, through the chastening effects of bodily discipline, our minds may be radiant in your presence with the strength of our yearning for you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jonah 3:1-10; Psalm 51:3-4, 12-13, 18-19;
Luke 11:29-32

As the crowds increased, Jesus said, This is a wicked generation. It asks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation. The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with the men of this generation and condemn

them; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here. (Luke 11:29-32)

They sought signs It is manifest that while Moses worked many miracles (such as the infliction of punishments on Pharaoh and on Egypt, and the parting of the Red Sea), Christ far surpassed him in them. Christ effortlessly expelled demons, healed the lepers, the blind, the lame, the paralysed. He raised the dead, walked on the Sea of Tiberius and calmed storms on the same great Lake. He himself rose by his own power from the dead — to speak nothing of his institution of the Church. Other prophets worked some miracles. We think of the miracles of Elijah and Elisha. But, truth to tell, miracles were not a notable feature of the generality of prophets, even major prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezechiel. They had no place at all in the life and ministry of the greatest of

them, John the Baptist — of whom our Lord said that no greater had been born of woman. This alone indicates that in God’s plan, miracles were not, nor were they meant to be, the principal instrument of the prophetic ministry in the history of God’s chosen people. It was the holiness and the fidelity of the prophet that told more than anything. I suggest that a paradigmatic example of this, in the life and ministry of our Lord himself, is the coming to faith of our Lord’s first disciples. It is recorded for us in the Gospel of St John. We see there, in the first chapter of this Gospel, that the first disciples – the principal Apostles – did not believe in Jesus Christ because of his *miracles*. Rather, relying on the testimony of another who was truly trustworthy, they then met and were convinced by the *Person and teaching* of Jesus Christ himself. We read that John the Baptist, looking on Jesus “*coming towards him*,” said (to his own disciples, obviously) that “*There is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*” (1:30). The next day, in the presence of his disciples, he repeated the declaration (1: 36). Having heard this testimony from

so trustworthy a master, the two left him to follow Jesus. They stayed with him “*that day*” (1:39). From that meeting and the knowledge of Jesus gained from it, they never looked back in faith. The next day Andrew bore witness to Simon and brought him to Jesus. Simon never looked back.

Faith came from being told about Jesus, coming to him, meeting him and getting to know him. Faith was born of an encounter with Jesus Christ — but it presumed that the one who met him was properly disposed in mind and heart. Faith was born of a meeting with Jesus Christ with a properly disposed heart. By contrast, it was precisely an adverse state of mind and heart which easily prevented the beginnings and growth of faith in Christ, despite one’s having an extensive familiarity with his Person. Christ lived for thirty years in Nazareth. He was known very well. But when he returned to Nazareth in the midst of his public ministry in Galilee, he did not find faith there — in fact, only opposition. We read that he could not work many miracles there, because there was so little faith. The

state of their hearts prevented the growth of faith. Most notorious of all, one of the very Twelve lost faith in Jesus. Judas must have begun with a species of faith, and one that was very promising because our Lord himself called him to the Apostleship from among his many disciples. But slowly Judas turned away from our Lord, and our Lord was entirely aware that this was happening. Judas was very familiar with the Person of Jesus Christ. He had begun well — presumably he, too, had begun by being told by someone trustworthy about the prophet of Nazareth, and had come to see and hear him. He saw, he heard, he was won, and he followed as a disciple. Then the day came for the call from Christ. From among his disciples our Lord chose Twelve — and Judas was among them. He thereafter lived in our Lord's company and experienced his personal friendship, and the inestimable privilege of living day by day in the company of God the Son. Further, he saw countless miracles. He even worked them in the name of his Master when he was sent out ahead of him to prepare the way. But he fell away and ended his short life so badly

as a traitor. Miracles alone did not bring about faith, let alone the faith that endures. Nor did merely meeting, seeing and hearing Jesus Christ. In our Gospel today (Luke 11:29-32) our Lord accuses his hearers of being “wicked” because they demanded miraculous signs. Their hearts were not right. They were not properly disposed. If they had been, miracles would have been both effective and forthcoming.

The great point for each of us in today’s Gospel is surely that, having received the testimony of the Church and standing firmly on it, we ought ever remain in Christ’s company, contemplating him long and lovingly. We ought live with him and in him, asking his grace to help us to believe, love and serve him the more, and never to fall away from him. It is the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ which secures and nourishes our faith, just as our faith, conversely, is the foundation of our knowledge and love of him. Let us, then, let go of all and follow him.

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Second reflection: (Luke 11:29-32)

The spirit of repentance In our Gospel passage today our Lord makes it clear that those who were asking for signs and wonders from him were “wicked” — they were “a wicked generation.” They would not repent. What the Ninevites saw and heard, led them to repent — and this was because they were disposed to repent. The “generation” that faced our Lord and heard his words did not have this disposition. Our Lord was requiring repentance, and our Lord holds up before them the example of the pagan Ninevites. As we think of these words of our Lord we are reminded that our spiritual progress depends on our readiness to repent. Sin is the obstacle in our way. We must renounce our sins and our attachment to them — especially our venial sins, and of anything that habitually leads to venial sin.

Let us aim at repentance during this Lent. Let us make it a special feature of this holy season, so that we

acquire the spirit of repentance as a gift of grace.
Everything depends on it, and on our cooperation with it.



Thursday of the First week in Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 90 (89):1-2 O Lord, you have been our refuge, from generation to generation; from age to age, you are.

Collect Look upon your family, Lord, that, through the chastening effects of bodily discipline, our minds may be radiant in your presence with the strength of our yearning for you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Esther C:12, 14-16, 23 25; Psalm 138:1-2cde-3, 7c-8; Matthew 7:7-12

Jesus said to his disciples: “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which one of you would hand his son a stone when he asked for a loaf of bread, or a snake when

he asked for a fish? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him. “Do to others whatever you would have them do to you. This is the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 7:7-12)

Getting the meaning If there is one thing that is clear about the ways of God in revealing himself, it is that God often *takes his time* in saying what he intends to say. He says one thing here, and he says another thing there. If we are to get the picture, we must look at many things. At the dawn of human history, God made it clear that the Serpent had not conquered. The “*woman*” and “*her seed*” would resist and would be victorious: “*I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall crush your head and you shall bruise his heel*” (Genesis 3:15). But it took a long time indeed before the divine intent in this conflict was manifested in its detail. More clarity came in the prediction to Abraham that “*by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves*”

(Genesis 12: 3). God was taking his time. The lines became a little clearer when Jacob, in blessing his sons the patriarchs, declared that *“the sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples”* (Genesis 49:10). Little by little a heavenly picture was being shown, and not everything was contained in any one declaration or manifestation. Rather, the hints kept coming. For instance, the prophet Nathan announced to David the remarkable promise, one that would seem to fly in the face of all lessons of history, that *“your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever”* (2 Samuel 7:16). Then there was the prophet Isaiah and his school. They too had various inspired things to say. There was the coming Servant of Yahweh who would possess God’s Spirit, and who would, of all things, *suffer*. He would be *“like a lamb that is led to the slaughter-house”* and *“cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people”* (Isaiah 53:7-8). The Isaiahan

oracles reached what we might even call their zenith in the prediction that “*I am coming to gather all nations and tongues; and they shall bring all your brethren from all the nations as an offering to the Lord ... to my holy mountain Jerusalem ... all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the Lord*” (66:18-23). I do not mean here to discuss the prophecies as such — I am pointing to a pattern. It is that, if we wish to know what God has taught us in one text, we must take many things into account.

That is to say, we cannot be “fundamentalist”, as it is termed. We must not think that the fundamentals of revealed religion are present and obvious in a random single statement. God has taken his time to reveal his plan, and bit by bit the picture is revealed — and even so, we need a divinely-constituted oracle to help us interpret correctly. That divinely-assisted oracle, of course, is Christ’s Church. We ought allow the many rays shed by the holy Writings to light up each statement of those very Writings. It is the one divine Author who has guided their creation and composition, and whatever he says at one

point is to be set within the context of what he says at the next or at further points. All this brings us to our wonderful Gospel passage today, in which our Lord tells his disciples that *“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.”* Does this mean that whenever and however and for whatever we ask, it will be given? Even ordinary natural reason would suggest that this cannot be the meaning, if we are speaking of a good and wise God. The obvious problem in all prayer of petition is knowing what is in our best interest. What would one say of a father of a child who gave to the child a loaded revolver, because the child insistently asked for it? The granting of such a request would be morally reprehensible and utterly unworthy of someone who is supposed to be good. Therefore the texts of inspired Scripture are to be read, to a point, using our *reason*. But then, too, the divine Author says other things at other moments which can throw light on the meaning of

a particular text, because it is the same Author who has said all of it. There were times when our Lord was asked for things, and he did not grant them. When the mother of the sons of Zebedee together with her two sons came to our Lord with their request, our Lord asked what she and they wanted him to do for them — showing his willingness to accede. They wanted to be positioned at his right and his left in his glory. No, I cannot offer you that, he said — but he went on to predict something better. They would drink his chalice (Matthew 20: 20-23). Plainly, there are many things involved in the divine answer to petitions.

But what is abundantly clear in our Gospel passage today is that our Lord *wants* us to ask for what we need. Now, what do we need? Are we sure of what we really need, despite what we think we need? What we truly need is to do the will of God. Our Lord wants, in the first instance, that we do the will of our heavenly Father, and that we be solicitous for the fulfilment of his holy will. Let us then, when faced with all our daily needs, place them in his fatherly care. When considering this or that blessing,

let us place ourselves in his presence and ask for the grace to know what is in accord with his holy will — and then to ask for it. Let us keep on asking, knowing, though, that he knows best.



Friday of the First week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 25 (24):17-18 Set me free from my distress, O Lord. See my lowliness and suffering, and take away all my sins.

Collect Grant that your faithful, O Lord, we pray, may be so conformed to the paschal observances, that the bodily discipline now solemnly begun may bear fruit in the souls of all. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezekiel 18:21-28; Psalm 130:1-8;
Matthew 5:20-26

Jesus said, I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his

brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny. (Matthew 5:20-26)

Our brother Our Gospel passage today comes early in the Sermon on the Mount, which is, we might say, a compilation of our Lord's teaching given early in his public ministry. The Sermon on the Mount begins with the wonderful Beatitudes (5:1-12), continues then with the exhortation to be salt and light (5:13-16), and commands fidelity to the law and the prophets which he, Christ, has

come to fulfil (5:17-19). To this point (5: 1-19), Christ's teaching in the Sermon is both introductory and summary. It provides a broad overview and instructs in the spirit of Christ's law. Now, though, our Lord gets down to the detail, and the first thing we notice is our Lord's introductory warning against regarding "*the justice of the scribes and Pharisees*" as the standard to be emulated. Their righteousness is not sufficient, in itself, to enter the kingdom of heaven. It would appear that our Lord has in mind their neglect of a religion of the heart. They fulfilled external observances — those commands and prescriptions which could be seen by men — but their hearts were far from what God required. They did not fulfil the spirit of the divine commands. And so our Lord introduces his first directive, and he begins it by referring to one of the Ten Commandments — that against murder. "*You have heard that it was said to the men of old, You shall not murder.*" But, our Lord continues, merely to do this is not sufficient. Any man "*who says to his brother, You Fool! must answer for it in hell fire.*" Just as you must not strike unjustly

against the life of another, so you must not strike at him unjustly with *words* that wound him. As we all know, in a civilized society governed by law, verbal injury can in large measure be beyond the reach of the rule of law. But while our Lord warns us against inflicting unjust injury by our very words, his teaching also reminds us of the habit of courtesy. I have known those who have done great good for others, but their work has been marred by their lack of courtesy. How great is the good that can be done by mere courtesy! Courtesy towards others is a most worthy goal to seek, and if attained, will be the cause of so much good.

But then there is the terrible matter of unresolved grudges, resentments, and general alienation of heart from our neighbour. We see enduring and intractable examples of this in families. Spouses cannot reconcile and when one looks at it carefully, the concrete issues causing the alienation are at times, even often, not major. So they part. Brothers and sisters separate and are scarcely on speaking terms. In-laws at times cannot bear one another, the daughter-in-law constantly aggrieved at the attitude of her

husband's mother. Usually there is both justice and fault on both sides, and if it all continues in the same direction, there will never be a meeting of minds and hearts. What alternative is there other than what Jesus Christ directs? They must take the step and be reconciled. The human race is marked by a great trail of fire and smoke — it is the fire of conflict, tribe against tribe, society against society, country against country. How could this possibly be in mankind's best interest? Its only result is tears and rubble, the loss of life and property, and hearts consumed permanently with hatred and resentment. The only wholesome step to take is that of forgiveness and reconciliation. It is interesting to notice the growing body of research being done on the beneficial effects of forgiveness on health. It is being found scientifically that people are healthier in mind and body if they are able to forgive and be reconciled. Archbishop Fulton Sheen used to say that scientific surveys give us decimal points. That is to say, the researchers tell us what we know, but they can put a mathematical or statistical figure to it. It is obvious

that we are far better off in mind and body if we can be reconciled with our brother and, as they say, “let bygones be bygones.” This, though, is not just a matter of good policy which ordinary human reflection and reason can understand. It is primarily a matter of obeying the divine will. Christ has made it absolutely clear that he requires of us that if we wish to worship God, we must also endeavour to be reconciled with our brother.

Let us make a big thing of this in our life. The danger is that we can go right through life never being reconciled with those who have something against us, or with those against whom we ourselves have something. We can fail to forgive. In fact, it can be regarded as one of the biggest spiritual challenges of life, and it may take the whole of life to do it. So we must begin now, knowing that the only day we are sure of is the present day. So then, now I begin! Let us resolve now to speak with courtesy to others, and to live in reconciliation with them.

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Second reflection: (Ezekiel 18:21-28; Matthew 5:20-26)

Holiness at any cost *“If your virtue goes no deeper than that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven”* (Matthew 5:20). For so many of us, the standard of virtue we settle for is little more than average. We are content not to be worse than those around us, the Christians we see or rub shoulders with, or the good friends we have. But our Lord has made it clear that each of us should aim high. *“Be holy, as I am holy”*, we read God telling us already in the Old Testament. If holiness is ever to become our ambition, we must cultivate a profound sense of personal responsibility (Ezekiel 18:21-28). We have but one life and then we face eternity. No-one else will be held accountable for how we use the time we have been given. Our eternity will be determined by the degree of our love — our love for God himself, and in God, our love for our neighbour. It will depend on me, for the grace of God on which everything really depends will not be lacking.

Let us take up the daily challenge: holiness at all costs. So then, now I begin!



Saturday of the First week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 19 (18):8 The law of the Lord is perfect; it revives the soul. The decrees of the Lord are steadfast; they give wisdom to the simple.

Collect Turn our hearts to you, eternal Father, and grant that, seeking always the one thing necessary and carrying out works of charity, we may be dedicated to your worship. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Deuteronomy 26:16-19; Psalm 119:1-2, 4-5, 7-8; Matthew 5:43-48

Jesus said to his disciples: “You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust.

For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brothers and sisters only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same? So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:43-48)

Love There have been discoveries and inventions of enormous consequence to culture and the life of societies. The wheel was, proverbially, one such invention. We commonly say that there is no point in re-inventing the wheel. The Internet has been another — consider it for but a moment. The Internet began with the development of computers in the mid-twentieth century — a message was sent from Leonard Kleinrock’s computer laboratory at the University of California, Los Angeles, to Stanford Research Institute. Packet switched networks were developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and gradually multiple separate networks were joined together into a network of networks — it was an inter-network (an “internet”). In the early 1980s a concept of a world-wide

network of networks called the Internet was introduced. In the late 1980s commercial Internet service providers emerged, and in the mid-1990s the Internet was commercialized, enabling commercial traffic. With that, there was instant messaging and mail, followed by phone and video calls, discussion forums, blogs, social networking, online shopping sites. Its effect has been enormous. Publishing firms are going out of business because they do not climb on board the Internet. The Internet continues to grow, surging ahead with its vast volume of information, commerce and social networking. Yes, technology is important and valuable indeed. How much difference to life has been made by the refrigerator, the washing machine, the electric blanket! So the media regularly keeps us up to date on the latest technological and scientific discoveries, in, say, medicine.

Yes, science and technology are very important. But let us get to the point here: we cannot help but notice that current affairs programs (so greatly assisted by technology) are regularly dominated not primarily by reports on and

analyses of science and technology, but by matters of practical *ethics*. Concrete *ethical* issues are (perhaps unconsciously) recognized as especially important, even if the ethical yardsticks that are used by the media are woefully inadequate. Society knows that what is right should be done and what is wrong should be avoided. If what is wrong is done, then there will be sanctions. What so often happens is that it thinks some wrong things to be right, and some right things to be wrong. Children must be protected, and to harm a child brings sanctions. Yet society can permit the harming of the unborn because an unborn person is out of sight and can be inconvenient.

Still, granted the ever-recurring disagreement and controversy as to what is right and wrong, few doubt the immense significance of the *moral* law. Take the long-running “Four Corners” program in Australian ABC television. The great majority of its weekly episodes dealt with significant *ethical* issues in Government, commerce and social life. This world of *ethical* issues is far and away the most interesting and captivating topic of journalism.

What I am saying is that all this bears witness to the fact that the moral life of man is indisputably the most important dimension of his existence. His technology and his scientific advances, mentioned earlier on, are truly significant. But if there is not a moral advance going on in the life of the individual and in society at large, then technology will probably enslave him. As a matter of fact, the Internet has done a lot of harm in the lives of many, and this is because their *moral* life is in disarray. They are slaves, and not masters, of the sea of putrid rubbish that surges along with the good that is on the Internet. I say all this to introduce one major point. The greatest contributor to the life of man is the one who contributes to his *moral* flourishing. It is this which makes him a better and happier man, and it is this which enables society to thrive with a truly human life. But what is the key to moral growth, and to whom may we look as man's Teacher? For — as was said earlier — while we all know that we must be moral, what we do not tend to know so well is, what this means in the concrete. There is a powerful answer to this which will

forever ring through the ages, and the Church is the one who does the ringing. The bell tolls powerfully for all to hear. *Jesus Christ is man's Teacher.* As was said by God his Father on the high mountain during his Transfiguration: "*This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him!*" He came, not bringing the wheel, nor the Internet, but the true key to human flourishing. All this brings us to our Gospel passage today (Matthew 5:43-48), in which our Lord tells us that we must love — even, as a matter of fact, our enemies. It is not enough for us to love the members of our immediate family or herd. Even the animals do something like this. I have seen films of buffalo driving off lions that have attacked their young. Christ has given man the key to the moral life: it is love, *a love like his.*

It is a moral and holy love, a love which is modelled on the Person and life of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, which is the way for man to advance. This is because, as Christ has revealed to us, the great God himself is nothing other than infinite Love. This is the key to the universe and its flourishing. It is a moral matter. So then,

let us take Christ's law to heart and make it the one thing necessary: *"Jesus said to his disciples: 'You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust.'"*



Second Sunday of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 27 (26):8-9 Of you my heart has spoken, Seek his face. It is your face, O Lord, that I seek; hide not your face from me.

Or:

Cf. Ps 25 (24):6, 2, 22 Remember your compassion, O Lord, and your merciful love, for they are from of old. Let not our enemies exult over us. Redeem us, O God of Israel, from all our distress.

Collect O God, who have commanded us to listen to your beloved Son, be pleased, we pray, to nourish us inwardly by your word, that, with spiritual sight made pure, we may rejoice to behold your glory. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Genesis 12:1-4a; Ps 33:4-5, 18-20, 22;
2 Timothy 1:8b-10; Matthew 17:1-9

Six days later Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain alone where he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as snow. Behold there appeared to them Moses and Elijah talking with him. Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, let us make three tents here, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah. As he was still speaking, behold a bright cloud overshadowed them and a voice spoke from the cloud, saying, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.” The disciples hearing this, fell on their faces and were very much afraid. Jesus came and touched them and said to them, “Arise, and do not fear.” Lifting their eyes they saw no one but only Jesus. As they came down from the mountain Jesus charged them saying, “Tell the vision to no one till the Son of man has risen from the dead.” (Matthew 17:1-9)

Future glory In a famous passage of his *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (1864) Cardinal Newman wrote that “Starting

then with the being of a God I look out of myself into the world of men, and there I see a sight which fills me with unspeakable distress. The world seems simply to give the lie to that great truth, of which my being is so full; and the effect upon me is, in consequence, as a matter of necessity, as confusing as if it denied that I am in existence myself... The sight of the world is nothing less than the prophet's scroll, full of 'lamentation, and mourning, and woe.'.... all this ... inflicts upon the mind the sense of a profound mystery, which is absolutely beyond human solution." (Chapter V, p.250-251, World's Classics ed.). Newman was giving voice to the problem of evil, a problem beyond a natural solution according to his testimony, the testimony of a saint and intellectual giant. In the life of every person, including that of Newman himself, there was, is, and will be suffering. Every parent ought remember this as they think of their children: suffering awaits each of them. Indeed, immense suffering could await one or other of them, suffering far greater than anything the parents have themselves had to bear. Are they, the parents, preparing

their children for this suffering? It cannot be avoided — it will assuredly come because we, all of us, are children of our first parents who fell so sadly from grace. That grace is restored by Baptism, but the natural condition of the world and all of us in it remain in a state of profound setback as a result of that original Fall. How are they, how are we, to prepare them for life's suffering? Years ago a famous psychiatrist attempted to plumb the secret of those who in the worst of conditions maintained personal equilibrium and even a level of joy. The conditions were those of the concentration camp in the Second World War. His answer was, to be possessed of a sense of life's meaning. Well then, do we know the meaning of suffering in life?

In our Gospel passage today (Matthew 7:1-9) we are presented with the Transfiguration of our Lord. Our Lord's face and clothes dazzled with light, and Moses and Elijah appeared speaking of his departure which he was to accomplish at Jerusalem. That departure, reminiscent of the departure of the chosen people of God from their

slavery in Egypt, would be accomplished through another Red Sea, the Sea of Suffering and blood. A cloud covers Jesus, and a voice from heaven says: “*This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him.*” Let us look on the Transfiguration of Christ as a pointer to the glory of heaven. Our Lord shows his divine glory for a moment, a glory in which we hope to share. He will have to go to this glory by way of the cross, and this is the path willed by the Father. The Law, represented by Moses, the prophets represented by Elijah, and the Psalms incorporating them both, had announced the sufferings of the Messiah. Now these two figures of the past appear in glory to speak of those sufferings with him. The Transfiguration speaks to us of the pattern of suffering leading to glory, and it is presented to us in the presence of the most holy Trinity. The Father is manifested in the Voice, the Son is the Man Jesus, and according to St Thomas Aquinas, the Holy Spirit is manifested in the bright Cloud. This is the Glory manifested, and the Glory is attained through the suffering. At our Lord’s baptism there had been a similar theophany.

The Father uttered his word revealing his beloved Son. The Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove, and with that our Lord's path to glory and that of his brothers was inaugurated. *This* baptism launched him on his journey to the *second* baptism, that of his *Passion and Death*. It reminds us of the presence of the Holy Trinity in our own baptism, immersing us in Christ and setting us on the road he followed, that of obedient suffering and to glory. If we contemplate Christ's Transfiguration, recalling with it his Baptism, we have therein the key to the mystery of life's sufferings. Suffering is the grand occasion of union with Jesus Christ, and it takes us with him to glory.

During Lent we ought often think of heaven. The way to heaven is through union with Jesus, and Jesus our Lord asks us to take up our cross every day and follow in his footsteps. During Lent we try in a special way to follow in the footsteps of Jesus as he prepares for his Passion and Death. We shall follow him in our celebration of his Passion, but all the while being reminded by the

Transfiguration of the heavenly glory that awaits him. That same glory awaits us too. It will be glory for ever and for ever in heaven, with Jesus and all those who are friends of Jesus.

Further Reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* no.554 556. (A foretaste of the Kingdom: The Transfiguration).



Monday of the Second week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 26 (25):11-12 Redeem me, O Lord, and have mercy on me. My foot stands on level ground; I will bless the Lord in the assembly.

Collect O God, who have taught us to chasten our bodies for the healing of our souls, enable us, we pray, to abstain from all sins, and strengthen our hearts to carry out your loving commands. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Daniel 9:4 10; Psalm 78; Luke 6:36 38

Jesus said to his disciples, Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap.

For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.
(Luke 6:36-38)

The sense of God One of the notable features of Western thought during the last couple of centuries has been the rise of what may be called the principle of ultimate reliance on private judgment, as against that of external authority. We now make up our own minds on things and are very suspicious of authority. In countless ways, this has been a great gain and has led to remarkable advances in scientific research, a new vigour in philosophical speculation and in other disciplines. It has been an important factor in the resistance against various types of monopoly in government. That having been said, the average person does not, of course, rely simply on his own private judgment. If he is to get on with life, he has to rely on the judgment of others too — indeed, in most things he must rely on authorities other than his own judgment. He relies on his bus to get to work, or his train, or on the competence of his mechanic to make sure his car is in order. He relies on his employer and he relies on the

law of the land to live out his life in some sort of security. Consider the religion that people profess. Commonly it is not one that they themselves have worked out as being objectively right. Usually it is the religion into which they have been born. Unless there is something about that religion which actively prompts them to reconsider it, generally they will live out their lives in that religion — unless they abandon religion altogether. This is the natural tendency and it is a matter, not of repudiating the principle of authority, but of allowing it to find its proper and legitimate place in our life. There is a proper place for accepting certain authorities, just as there is a proper place for accepting things on the basis of one's own private judgment — and it is a matter of finding the right balance such that we do attain the objective truth, and live by it. But there is a deeper way in which we depend on “authority.” I refer to the authority of our fundamental assumptions. In the last analysis, man — at least religious man — begins, and must begin, with some foundation which he takes as given, and on which he builds his life.

However vaguely, the foundation is his notion of who God is and what he is like. This starting point of his life may be out of his own sight, an unspoken, unrealized assumption. Alternatively, it may be deliberately chosen and cultivated.

There are fundamental assumptions, first principles we might say, basic starting points, that serve as the “authority” (broadly speaking) on which our actions are based. It is because we accept them that, to a significant degree, we act in the way we do, and think as we do. Stand back and observe a Muslim society or group, and compare it with a Christian or Jewish group. Are there differences? Of course there are — but I am not merely thinking of the specific differences that stem from particular religious precepts proper to each religion. I am thinking of the basic ethos or spirit of each. It is different and it results in ways of thinking and acting arising from differences in fundamental starting points. Basically, even if vaguely, there is a difference in the image or notion of God, allowing, of course, for much in common. It is the difference in the notion of the Absolute, however

conceived, which will shape the direction of life both of individuals and societies. In this sense there is a powerful and deeper “authority” in people’s lives — the authority of their basic, given perceptions of God or his perceived equivalent. This brings us to our Gospel today (Luke 6:36-38), in which our Lord tells us that we must be merciful, just as our heavenly Father is merciful. *“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you”* (Luke 6:36 38). God has revealed himself, especially and definitively in Jesus Christ, to be a God of *mercy and compassion*. Is this understanding of God lying at the root of our minds and hearts, so as to constitute truly the wellspring of our actions, the “authority” under which, and because of which we act and think as we do? We apprehend the true character of God from his revelation. We must make sure that our fundamental perceptions of God are shaped by the authority of this objective revelation, and not from some

other source. This we should appropriate at the depths of our minds and hearts, such that it becomes the authority guiding our life and inspiring our every day. The all-merciful God, precisely as objectively revealed, must be the “authority” guiding our lives.

Let us have ever before us the God who has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ. He is a God of compassion, all merciful. He requires of us his children that we be persons of compassion and mercy. Indeed, our judgment will in large measure depend on how truly we have been like Jesus Christ in his compassion, and God our Father in his mercy. As our Lord says, “*For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you*” (Luke 6:36-38). At the Last Judgment, we will hear the words, “*whatever you did to the least of these brothers of mine, you did to me*” (Matthew 25). Let us then resolve to be like God our Father every day of our lives, filling up our days with works of mercy and compassion.

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Second reflection: (Daniel 9:4-10)

The sense of sin We have in our first reading a great prayer from the Old Testament book of Daniel. It has much to offer modern man, for it expresses a profound sense of sin — the very thing modern man tends to lack. The prayer of this passage is permeated with this sense precisely because behind it there lies a profound sense of *God* and our *indebtedness* to him. God, the prophet Daniel prays, is great and to be feared. He is faithful and kind. For our part, we have sinned and disobeyed God's representatives. Yet God is a God of mercy and pardon. How common it is to lack a living and lively sense of God — and this right to the end of one's days. Lacking this, one will lack a sense of sin. Without the sense of sin we shall not be able to pray as Daniel prayed, seeking God's pardon and mercy. Let us try to make up for this by praying during Lent for the grace of a deep sense of sin and a profound desire for the pardon of God.



Tuesday of the Second week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 13 (12):4-5 Give light to my eyes lest I fall asleep in death, lest my enemy say: I have overcome him.

Collect Guard your Church, we pray, O Lord, in your unceasing mercy, and, since without you mortal humanity is sure to fall, may we be kept by your constant helps from all harm and directed to all that brings salvation. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 1:10.16-20; Ps 49; Matt. 23:1-12

Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practise what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift

a finger to move them. Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the market places and to have men call them 'Rabbi'. But you are not to be called 'Rabbi', for you have only one teacher and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your 'father', for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called 'master', for you have one Master, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. (Matt 23:1-12)

Christian humility One of the notable things in world history is the emergence of the West as the dominant cultural force across the globe. Classical Rome dominated the civilized world for centuries, but by the fifth and sixth centuries (AD) it was in tatters, a smoking ruin due to hammering by the barbarian hordes. Its demise heralded the Dark Ages which involved centuries of struggle amid

all kinds of setbacks. Europe at this time — I mean the late Dark Ages — could not rival the culture and power of, say, the Islamic world. For instance, it was from Islamic culture that the West began to recover the writings of Aristotle. Gradually, at the time of Charlemagne and the early Middle Ages, Christian Europe emerged. This is not the place to trace in detail the gradual rise of the West during and following the first millennium. But the question may be asked, what were the factors which led the West to become so dominant? Many observers are of the opinion that the West is now on the brink of a gradual decline because of its cultural exhaustion and moral confusion. It lacks confidence in its religious roots and its philosophical heritage. It does not believe it is legitimate to stand for anything definite if this involves a negative judgment on the perspectives of others. That is to say, philosophical relativism holds the field, and the way seems wide open for fundamentally different visions of reality to gain the victory. For instance, at this point Islam seems to be a serious challenge facing secular France. If the West

does not recover the sources of its strength, it may be on the brink of a significant decay. So, what was the reason for the superiority of the West? Now, in anything like this, it is always instructive to hear what outside observers have to say, especially if those observers represent a future challenge. I remember a priest who taught Modern History saying in the late 1950s that China would be the coming dominant power. Many think that the growing power of China — gradual, fitful, yet perhaps unstoppable — may be equipping it to take the lead in the century to come. Perhaps. Well, there are some in China who have things to say about the rise of the West.

A former editor of the *Sunday Telegraph*, Dominic Lawson, in a review in the *Sunday Times* of Niall Ferguson's book, *Civilisation: The West and the Rest*, quoted from a member of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences who tried to account for the success of the West, to date. He said: "*One of the things we were asked to look into was what accounted for the success, in fact, the pre-eminence of the West all over the world. We studied*

everything we could from the historical, political, economic, and cultural perspective. In the past twenty years, we have realised that the heart of your culture is your religion: Christianity. That is why the West is so powerful. The Christian moral foundation of social and cultural life was what made possible the emergence of capitalism and then the successful transition to democratic politics. We don't have any doubt about this." Now, I am not in any way suggesting that this sums up the whole matter, but Lawson did well in quoting it in his review of Ferguson. It does illustrate the fact that Christianity has been an absolutely essential element in the formation of the soul of Europe, and therefore of the West. Why am I making this general point? I wish to highlight the distinctiveness of the Christian picture of the good man. The Christian idea of what is good, preferable, and in the long run most valuable, has shaped the intellect and the soul of the West and contributed to its flourishing. This brings us to our Gospel passage today (Matthew 23: 1-12), in which Christ speaks of a virtue which will scarcely be

found in literature outside Divine Revelation, and in particular outside the Person and teaching of Jesus Christ. I refer to Christ's exaltation of the virtue of *humility*. This is not just any kind of "humility" — it is the humility of *Christ*, a virtue that is fundamental among those virtues that make up the revealed picture of Christian goodness. Of course, the West is far from a true living of this Christian virtue. But this virtue has been part of the idea of the good and holy man which, because of Christianity, Western culture at its best — and not at its materialistic and secular worst — has brought to the world.

This is not a matter of mere academic reflection. The Christian is called to be the light of the world, and the salt of the earth. This he will be to the extent that he lives as Christ lived by the aid of his grace. The greatest thing we can do for our world, for our culture, for our society, and for all men, *is to follow Jesus Christ in our everyday life*. He is the good and holy Man — and as he said to one enquirer, no one is good but God alone. He, of course, is God. Christ is the answer to the world's need, and in our

Gospel he stresses the path to an authentic flourishing: *humility after the manner of Christ*. If the West and the rest of the world is truly to flourish, let it take the path of Christ, and this will also mean following him in his humility.



Second reflection: (Matthew 23:1-12)

Choosing humility One of the many fascinating things to notice in the animal kingdom is how many animals try to dominate one another and to have precedence. Have you ever noticed how a dog will, if he can, try to be the “top dog”? Watch a documentary film on monkeys and apes, and you will see that the same thing features among them. Seeing this reminds us that having the desire to be first and to exalt oneself over others — a pattern that so marks the history of mankind — is hardly distinctively human. Dominating others cannot be said to make a man greater as a man. All too often it is the opposite — it often makes a man more like an animal.

Our Lord described himself as meek and humble of heart. St Paul tells us that Christ emptied himself and became as men are, and humbler yet even to the point of death. God, then, is profoundly humble, and chooses to humble himself. For this reason our Lord says in our Gospel passage today (Matthew 23:1-12) that the one who humbles himself will be exalted. He is the one who is like God. Let us this Lent pray for the grace to seek to be humble after the manner of Christ.



Wednesday of the Second week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 38 (37):22-23 Forsake me not, O Lord! My God, be not far from me! Make haste and come to my help, O Lord, my strong salvation!

Collect Keep your family, O Lord, schooled always in good works, and so comfort them with your protection here as to lead them graciously to gifts on high. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 18:18-20; Psalm 30;

Matthew 20:17-28

Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life! Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came

to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favour of him. What is it you want? he asked. She said, Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom. You don't know what you are asking, Jesus said to them. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink? We can, they answered. Jesus said to them, You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father. When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave-just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Matthew 20:17-28)

Discipleship In the time of our Lord, there were those who positively rejected him. This very real element,

by no means insignificant or in the background, St John refers to directly in the Prologue of his Gospel. “*He came unto his own,*” John writes, “*and his own did not receive him.*” In the second volume of his trilogy on Jesus of Nazareth, Pope Benedict XVI rejects the notion that the Jewish people as such orchestrated the death of Jesus Christ. Rather, it was the Temple aristocracy and those associated with them. There were others who rejected our Lord — such as many of his own disciples who walked out of his company when he announced the doctrine of the Eucharist (John 6:66). One of the very Twelve took the step of betraying him. Apart from these, there were very many who in one sense or another followed him — the gospels speak of large crowds in tow, and of our Lord being virtually submerged in work with these crowds. He and the Twelve often had no time to eat, and we see him contriving to get them apart for moments of rest where he could instruct them more deeply. He even took the step of leaving Galilee and Judea for the regions of Tyre and the Decapolis to have time away from it all. So lots of people

were following him — but scarcely as true *disciples*. They were out to get relief from their sufferings, and to hear his word which impressed them so powerfully. Serious discipleship was a further matter, and our Lord's parables show that he was fully alive to the limits beyond which his hearers would not go. In fact, we are told that one reason why he taught so constantly in parables was not merely for pedagogical effect, but precisely because so many of his hearers did not have the moral dispositions necessary to see and accept the true drift of his teaching. His explanations were given later to those who were more truly his disciples. So it is that our Lord on various occasions made it clear in what true discipleship consisted. What our Lord was looking for went far beyond what an eminent philosopher of the times might expect of his devotees, or a prophet (such as Isaiah or John the Baptist) might expect of his disciples. Our Lord expected total devotion to his Person and teaching, and nothing less.

To begin with, his closest friends and disciples had to get used to the idea that he was not going to be a roaring

success, in the popular sense of the word. He would not carry all before him in the way a signal champion or ruler might. He claimed to be the promised, anointed King, the Messiah — the thought of which riveted the chosen people of God. But he would be a disappointment, in a worldly sense. We have it on record in the gospels that our Lord repeatedly told the Twelve — and to their complete perplexity — that his days were numbered. He was, Luke takes pains to show in the very structure of his gospel, purposely heading towards Jerusalem, all the while making clear to his disciples that there in the City it would be all over for him. This is what he was choosing, *precisely because it was the divine plan*. The divine plan was that he, God's Anointed, the long-awaited Messiah, would be entirely cast aside. But then — and this seems to have been completely missed and forgotten by his confused disciples — he would rise again. *Then* would come the glory and the kingdom. So this was the kind of Messiah they were following, and they had to understand it as clearly as possible. Our Lord wanted disciples of a

crucified Christ, crucified and risen. But that was not the end of it. Our Lord wanted disciples who would be wholehearted in their following of him right through what he would go through. He would pass through the fire, and he wanted disciples who would pass through the fire with him. He would drink the cup, and he wanted disciples who would drink the cup with him — all because of their love for him and their conviction that the Father had indeed sent him. So it is that we read that James and John — who would be two of the “pillars” of the early Church — came to him with their mother to ask of him that, in his kingdom, they be at his right and left. They were made of sterling stuff, but they did not understand what they were asking. *“You don’t know what you are asking, Jesus said to them. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?”* They assured Jesus that they could, and Jesus confirmed it — perhaps giving them there and then a special grace to do so.

In the Garden of Gethsemane Christ would ask his heavenly Father to spare him having to drink this cup, but it was his Father’s will that he do so — and this he did

fully and willingly. The greatest grace we could possibly ask for and obtain is that of being willing to drink of this same cup in union with the Master. It is not just a matter of keeping company with Jesus Christ — although this is an essential beginning and component. It is also a matter of going on with him to Calvary. If anyone wishes to be his disciple, our Lord says elsewhere, he must take up his cross daily and follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Let us pray for the grace to do this, then!



Thursday of the Second week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 139 (138):23-24 Test me, O God, and know my thoughts. See that my path is not wicked, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Collect O God, who delight in innocence and restore it, direct the hearts of your servants to yourself, that, caught up in the fire of your Spirit, we may be found steadfast in faith and effective in works. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1;

Luke 16:19-31

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's

side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.' But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.' He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' 'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not

be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.' (Luke 16:19-31)

The poor There are two things about religion that are fairly well known. The first is that the high gods of most religions are somewhat unconcerned for the world after their work of creation is done. They often then recede from the scene and leave the field to their underlings among the deities — the lesser gods. But even these lesser gods are not particularly concerned for man. Consider, say, the popular gods and goddesses of the religions of ancient Greece and Rome. Their attention was primarily directed to their own interests, competing with one another, easily irritated, and coming to the assistance of man when man satisfied all the ceremonies and forced his attention on them. Notably, they were not driven by the desire to make this world a better place, and the sufferings and evils of this world left them largely untouched. The poor meant little to them. In ancient Roman religion and myth, Jupiter or Jove was the king of the gods and the god of sky and thunder. The equivalent of Zeus in the Greek pantheon, he was the

support of the *state*, not of the poor and the oppressed. In his large book, *The Classical World* (Penguin, 2006), Robin Lane Fox writes that for Roman nobles “their religious rites honoured and appeased the gods so as to maintain the all-important ‘peace of the gods’ and avert their anger... It kept Rome and the Romans safe.” Again, “the main aim of religious cult was to aid worldly success, not to save citizens from sin” (p.298). I do not think that, outside of revealed Judaeo-Christian religion, religion has been much of a force for *concern for the downtrodden*, the despised and the forgotten. While the properly developed conscience might have dictated justice and concern for those in need, religion as such did not greatly support such dictates. One could be “religious” and still somewhat unconcerned for the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed. That said, there is a second thing about religion that is well known. It is that the Judaeo-Christian revelation is contrary to all this. It is commanded by Revealed Religion that the least fortunate be attended to and served. A religious life that knowingly accepts a disregard for the

poor and suffering is discounted and declared by this divine revelation to be reprehensible.

There are very many things that are distinctive of the teaching of Jesus Christ. His revelation did not supplant divine revelation before him, but fulfilled it. For instance, God's judgment on sin is a constant theme in the Old Testament, but in Jesus Christ it reaches new proportions. There is the clear doctrine of an eternal Hell (and this is seen in our parable today). There is not only an individual judgment, but a General Judgment at the end of time. Again, throughout the Old Testament, Yahweh God requires of his people that they care for the downtrodden and those deprived of what they need. But in the teaching of Jesus Christ this commandment becomes altogether more extensive. In a major presentation of his doctrine of the final judgment, our Lord makes the eternal prospects of each person dependent on how he served those in need. Further, he himself identifies with those in need. "*I was hungry and you gave me food*" (Matthew 25). The Old Testament commanded that each person love his

neighbour. But who was the “neighbour”? On one occasion a man of the Law asked our Lord this very question, and our Lord went on to tell the parable of the Good Samaritan. That Good Samaritan was a true neighbour to the one who had fallen among the robbers. So, revealed religion commands love for *anyone* who is in need. In our Gospel today (Luke 16:19-31), our Lord tells his famous parable about the rich man and the poor man, Lazarus. The rich man did not impose hardships on Lazarus. The sin that damned him was his deliberate neglect of the poor at his very gate. What did the rich man do that involved him so constantly neglecting the poor? We are not told, but neglect him he did. Day after day he put the poor man out of his conscience and hardened his heart against his plight. It is so easy to do just this — to keep putting off our assistance to our needy neighbour. There is always an excuse, always a reason for hanging on to much, much more than we really need, and play the harp, as it were, while Rome burns. But life is short and eternity is long. Thinking of what Christ requires in this parable,

what shall we wish we had done, when the last moments of life arrive?

It is a strange thing that the more we have, the less we tend to give. We can, without realizing it, be profoundly attached to material possessions. We can be blind to the needs of others, and somewhat like the priest and the Levite who passed by on the other side when they saw the man lying on the side of the road half-dead. We can be a little like the rich man in our Lord's parable today. Let us pray for the grace to be detached from our worldly possessions, and freed by the power of this grace to give and to serve our brothers and sisters in need. Christ gives us a tremendous incentive to do this. He has told us that whatever we do to the least, he will count as having been done to *him* — and he will reward us accordingly. Let us do this, then!

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Second reflection: (Jeremiah 17:5-10)

The heart of man *“I, the Lord, search the heart ... to give each man what his conduct and his actions deserve”* (Jeremiah 17:10). There will be no avoiding the judgment of God on the ultimate roots of our conduct, which is to say the state of our heart. We will be judged on the degree of true love that possesses our heart, our love for God and our love for others in God. On this we are ourselves unable to judge, nor can anyone else, but only God. So we must work on this all our lives, never knowing how much time we have to achieve the task. We were made to know, love and serve God, and our judgment will be on the extent to which this purpose has been achieved.

So let us put our minds and hearts to the task each day. We must put our trust in the Lord, with him for our hope, as the prophet Jeremiah says (17:5-8). With the Lord as our constant stay, we will bear fruit — fruit that comes from the Lord.



Friday of the Second week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 31 (30):2, 5 In you, O Lord, I put my trust, let me never be put to shame; release me from the snare they have hidden for me, for you indeed are my refuge.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that, purifying us by the sacred practice of penance, you may lead us in sincerity of heart to attain the holy things to come. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Genesis 37:3-4.12-13.17-28; Psalm 104;
Matthew 21:33-43.45-46

Jesus said, Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his

servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them in the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants? He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, they replied, and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time. Jesus said to them, Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes'? Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about

them. They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet. (Matthew 21:33-43.45-46)

The fact of God From the dawn of human thought, there has been the intractable problem of evil and suffering. Evil and suffering is, in a sense, a difficulty for all living things, but it is a special problem for man because man thinks and makes judgments. Man can reflect on himself as an independent being, he can know external things precisely as things that exist in their own right, and he can make choices and set his own course. At every point he is frustrated in his chosen path by the sufferings and evils that afflict and thwart him. In a word, man has this problem: he suffers, and he knows it. But he has this too: when he suffers, he can turn to the gods. He is confident that they will help him if he takes the trouble to keep them happy. Yes, there are all these evils, but there are also the gods. He does not question the fact of the one nor of the other. For those in the pagan classical world who bothered to think, the nature of the gods was a misty

matter. In *The Nature of the Gods*, Cicero writes, “There are many questions in philosophy to which no satisfactory answer has yet been given. But the question of the nature of the gods is the darkest and most difficult of all.” But the masses who suffered did not doubt the fact of the divine. Occasionally, though, there was something unusual: some decided that while the evils are evident facts, the gods who cannot be seen and who are proved by the evils of life to be virtually useless, are mere phantoms. There are no gods, these few decided — there are just the evils, and we had better be getting on with it if we are to avoid the evils. If anything is to be done about suffering, it is a chimera to be speaking of the gods. Now, this is not just an occasional thought that arose in pagan cultures. It has reared its head with a vengeance even in cultures blessed with the knowledge of that Revelation brought to man by Jesus Christ and proclaimed by his Church. Indeed, it is precisely in Christian cultures, with its roots in Catholic Christianity, that the “problem of evil” has been especially powerful and notorious. The Psalmist states that “*the fool*

says in his heart that there is no God” (Ps.14:1). But the “wise and clever” (Matthew 11:25) of our secular age have declared the dogma that the fact of evil proves that there is no God. It is the fool who says in his heart that there is a God. Marx had his version of this: God was a mere opiate that kept the masses content.

A significant century for the rise of Western secularism was the eighteenth, and David Hume’s various writings concerning the idea of a good and all-powerful God are among the most influential interventions on this topic. Newman, in his classic *Idea of a University*, refers to Hume’s thought as “simply a disgrace.” Despite this, Hume is regarded by professional philosophers as having advanced a powerful critique of the philosophical underpinnings of Revealed Religion. In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Hume considers an ancient argument based on the existence of evil that is intended to establish that there is no God. It comes in the form of “Epicurus’s old questions” which remain “unanswered” (D, 100). They are the predictable ones: Is God willing to

prevent evil but unable to do so? Then he is not omnipotent. Is God able to prevent evil but unwilling to do so? Then he is malevolent (or certainly not perfect). If God is both willing and able to prevent evil then why is there evil in the world? So God cannot be a moral being in the face of all these bad things. All up, there is no God. Various Christian philosophers, since our friend Hume, have answered him — perhaps especially in our day the Calvinist Alvin Plantinger. This is not the moment to explore such responses. But let us look at it from God's point of view, because this tells us of the real problem of evil. The root of it all is sin, which thwarted all that God intended for angels and man. Evil and suffering came from sin. It is sin that caused the terrible mess. As a matter of fact, we have an emblematic picture of evil and suffering, and it consists in the evil and suffering that was heaped upon God the Son. God so loved the world that he sent his only-begotten Son to save the world from itself. But what happened? Broadly, the world did not accept him. All this brings us to our Gospel parable today (Matthew 21:33-43.

45-46), in which our Lord has the Son, who is at length sent to the tenants, being utterly rejected. “*This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.*’ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.” Now that is the problem of evil and suffering with a vengeance. We need to look on all things from the Creator’s perspective. The Son of God himself comes among his own. He is horribly roughed-up, is thrown out, and ends up in a tomb.

In the philosophical discussions as exemplified in David Hume’s writings, the matter is presented as an intellectual problem which this person solves in one way, and that person solves in another. But the ominous feature of the question of God and the rejection of him is that sooner or later there is going to be a Reckoning for everyone. God will search the hearts of all, and there will be no escape. Our Lord often speaks of the Divine Judgment, and in particular of the final condemnation of the wicked. We had better take careful note of what he, our Redeemer, says. It could be a wretched end:

“Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants? He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,” they replied. Let us take our stand with Jesus Christ and live according to his teaching — and thus avoid that wretched end.



Saturday of the Second week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Ps 145 (144):8-9 The Lord is kind and full of compassion, slow to anger, abounding in mercy. How good is the Lord to all, compassionate to all his creatures.

Collect O God, who grant us by glorious healing remedies while still on earth to be partakers of the things of heaven, guide us, we pray, through this present life and bring us to that light in which you dwell. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Micah 7:14-15.18-20; Psalm 102;

Luke 15:1-3.11-32

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law murmured, This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them. Then Jesus told them this parable: There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father,

‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’ So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your

son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate. Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ ‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad,

because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' (Luke 15:1-3.11-32)

God's love If one is to make any observation about the history of religion, or the content of the religions of man, one must fall back on general impressions. It would be impossible to do the research necessary to document the matter exhaustively. That said, my own impression is that, outside the Judeo-Christian revelation and those religions influenced by it (such as Islam), the gods of the religions were not concerned about *sin* as such. The heavens or the underworld are peopled by deities of various descriptions and rank, and they live their own lives while possessing certain powers over the course of the world. They are supplicated and appeased by religious rites, and so their protection is obtained. But their interest, in the main, is not directed to sin and its removal. They do not want to be irritated, but it is not objective immorality which irritates them as such. Indeed, many of the gods are caught up in sinful activities themselves. Accordingly, salvation from sin was not generally the purpose of religion

— although doubtless there were some exceptions to this. Now, there were numerous things that stood out about the religion of the Hebrews. One was its insistence on but one God — perhaps beginning with the insistence on the exclusive *worship* of but one God, and then insisting on the *existence* of but one God as an essential corollary. Secondly, this one and only God was *holy*. He had no sin, and refused to allow sin to be committed. If it was committed, he would punish the sinner. Sin was not just anything which irritated his preferences, rather it was that which was objectively bad. It was wrong to steal, to dishonour one's parents, to commit adultery, to murder, to bear false witness against another, or to covet another's wife or goods. These things were wrong in themselves and were therefore not to be done — and if they were done, there would be a rupture in the relationship with God. God was holy, and commanded holiness in his people. So the idea of sin, punishment for sin, and alienation from God as a result of sin, were key ideas in the revealed religion of Israel. The problem obviously was, what was to happen

with the sinner, for all, it seemed, were sinners. As a matter of fact, the whole story of Israel, as documented in its inspired writings, was a chronicle of inveterate sin.

This is why there was a further fundamental idea in the religion of Israel — but it did not have a great deal of initial clarity. The God of the Hebrews was intent on doing away with sin — which is to say, on cleansing his people from their sins and making them acceptable to him. Moreover, this was part of the blessing to be brought to the nations. Salvation from sin was yet another novelty brought to the world of religions by the Hebrew Revelation. The Promise was there, but not initially in clear outline. How it was to be done was yet to be revealed. Various prophets had announced it, but its outlines were somewhat vague. Even though much of the ritual was ordered towards the taking away of various sins, this was not the root and branch answer to the problem. As an aside, I wonder if this is one reason for the lack of a strong redemptive motif in Islam — for Mahomet drew much from the Jewish faith, and Islam lacks the Fall and

especially an answer to the Fall. But Jesus Christ came to take away the sin of the world, and he did so by his Death and Resurrection. This is the fulfilment of the Old Testament revelation about sin. Together with other teachings about God that are unique to the revelation of Jesus Christ, this salvation from sin is a signal novelty in the history of religion. But more than this, it is out of love for sinful man that God sent his only-begotten Son to take away sin. God, it has been revealed, for all his hatred for sin and his refusal to brook it, loves with undying love the sinner. He is prepared to do anything for sinners — and he sent the eternal Jewel of his divine life, his own Son, to die that we sinners might live forever. This Good News of the love of God for sinful man is not absent from the Old Testament, but it did receive a stunning fulfilment in the New. In this further sense, God has spoken definitively and finally in his Son Jesus Christ. God, the all-holy God, the God who hates sin and who commands us to be holy, loves us with a boundless love — us, who are sinners in his sight. This is the context of our Gospel today (Luke 15:1-

3.11-32), when our Lord explains to his critics why he is associating with the publicans and sinners. He is the revelation of a God who is a loving Father. His parable of the Prodigal Son is a parable of the father who is so prodigal with his love.

It is imperative that we immerse ourselves in two great facts: firstly that God, the Creator and Lord of heaven and earth, *loves* us with an infinitely tender love. Secondly, that we are *sinners* in his sight. We can easily miss both of these two fundamental points. We must, we absolutely must learn the facts of our situation. We are sinners by birth and by personal decision. We have no right to the love of God, but we have it. God ardently loves us. The one thing that God asks of us is that we recognize his love and that we set about the business of renouncing sin, and resolving to sin no more. Let us make this a fundamental programme of daily life, and especially during Lent.

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Second reflection: (Luke 15:1-3.11-32)

Our idea of God It scarcely needs to be said that a person's religion will depend on his idea of God. Our Gospel passage (Luke 15:1-3.11-32) conveys an image of God, and it comes from the mouth of Our Lord. It is the story of the Prodigal Son. Our Lord told it because the scribes and Pharisees were complaining that he was welcoming sinners and dining with them. It is the story of how the amazingly kind father welcomed his sinful son warmly back into his love. The story, then, is an explanation of our Lord himself and his love for sinners. Ultimately of course, inasmuch our Lord Jesus Christ is the revelation of the Father, the story is also about our heavenly Father.

Let us fill our hearts with the right impression of God, God who hates sin, but who is full of love and compassion for the sinner who wishes to turn back to him. God lovingly invites us to repent.



Third Sunday of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 25 (24):15-16 My eyes are always on the Lord, for he rescues my feet from the snare. Turn to me and have mercy on me, for I am alone and poor.

Or:

Cf. Ez 36:23-26 When I prove my holiness among you, I will gather you from all the foreign lands; and I will pour clean water upon you and cleanse you from all your impurities, and I will give you a new spirit, says the Lord.

Collect O God, author of every mercy and of all goodness, who in fasting, prayer and almsgiving have shown us a remedy for sin, look graciously on this confession of our lowliness, that we, who are bowed down by our conscience, may always be lifted up by your mercy. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Exodus 17:3-7; Psalm 95:1-2, 6-9;
Romans 5:1-2, 5-8; John 4:5-42

Jesus came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of land that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there. Jesus, tired from his journey, sat down there at the well. It was about noon. A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." His disciples had gone into the town to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him, "How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?" -For Jews use nothing in common with Samaritans.- Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you do not even have a bucket and the cistern is deep; where then can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us this cistern and drank from it himself with his children and his flocks?" Jesus answered and said to her, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again; but whoever drinks the water I

shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water. “I can see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain; but you people say that the place to worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus said to her, “Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You people worship what you do not understand; we worship what we understand, because salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth; and indeed the Father seeks such people to worship him. God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and truth.” The woman said to him, “I know that the Messiah is coming, the one called the Christ; when he comes, he will tell us everything.” Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking with you.” Many of the Samaritans of that town

began to believe in him. When the Samaritans came to him, they invited him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. Many more began to believe in him because of his word, and they said to the woman, "We no longer believe because of your word; for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the saviour of the world." (John 4:5-15, 19b-26, 39a, 40-42)

The living water One of the famous events of the first half of the nineteenth century in England was the sudden rise of the Oxford Movement. It was a movement within the Anglican Church, coming out of Oriel College at Oxford, to develop a Catholic and patristic spirit within the Anglican Church. In the event, some within it passed over to the Catholic Church, others continued to work within the Anglican Church for an increase in its Catholic ethos, and some even fell away from an adherence to Christian doctrine. Decades later one Anglican clergyman (Thomas Mozley) who had had some involvement in this Movement wrote a two-volume work entitled *Reminiscences of Oriel College and the Oxford Movement*. At the end of his

second volume he discusses various doctrines held by Catholic and Protestant writers. What strikes one about his discussion is his *uncertainty*, and it contrasts with the certainty that is a characteristic of the gift of faith, when properly functioning. Let that introduce today's text. In our Gospel today, our Lord promises the gift of "living water,... a spring inside ... welling up to eternal life" (John 4: 5-42). This "living water," this "spring inside," is the Holy Spirit and his grace, poured into our hearts at our Baptism, given to us in a new and fuller way at our Confirmation, and nourished regularly in the other Sacraments, especially the sacrament of the Eucharist. It is the source of divine life now and forever. The first result of our having received this heavenly gift is *faith*. We believe, and we have believed without too much difficulty for years — perhaps as long as we remember. This faith is a gift that comes from God the Holy Spirit, who is within us. It is by means of this gift of faith that we find ourselves lovingly inclined to believe in God and in all he has said and revealed to us, and all that the Church formally

proposes for our belief on Christ's behalf. By this gift of faith we are enabled to commit ourselves to God who has spoken in his word, and we show this commitment by our obedient acceptance of all he has revealed. The Scriptures tell us that the righteous person will live by faith. This life of faith, lived according to Christ's teaching as it comes to us from the mouth of the Church, is made possible by the gift of God's grace.

This gift of faith that we have received, and which abides within our souls, will remain there provided we do not neglect it, for it is the gift of the Holy Spirit who dwells within. We must, then, avoid the occasions of sins against faith. Such an occasion would be to read out of mere curiosity or mental lethargy novels and other literature that call into question dogmas of our faith. If we do this knowingly, we are placing ourselves in an occasion dangerous to faith. That itself is sinful. It is an offence against God and against our own salvation which God so mightily wills and which has cost him so much. If we deliberately doubt, let alone begin to abandon, the dogmas

of our faith and the teachings of the Church, then we sin seriously in a fundamental matter of religion. It is divine faith, and not mere reason, that will get us to heaven and take us to holiness — provided we guard it as God's precious gift. But further, we must also actively put our faith to work. Faith apart from works — works inspired and required by faith — is, as St James writes in his inspired Letter, dead. It is of little use contenting ourselves that we accept what our Lord revealed and what the Church teaches, while doing nothing about it. There is little living faith in a person who continues to sin seriously, and without repentance. It is like the bandit who often calls upon the Virgin for protection while going about his highway robberies. Our Lady told the servants at Cana, *Do whatever he tells you*. The gift of faith is so very precious. If adhered to, it takes a person beyond the avoidance of sin to holiness. It is the foundation of obedience, and with it other gifts are granted to us at our Baptism. We receive therein the gifts of hope and love, which take the fervent believer on his road to sanctity provided they are

nourished. They make up the components of the “living water” within, the “spring inside” him, leading to holiness and eternal life. But there is more. This gift of faith, enabling the believer to accept the full revelation that has come from God, also prompts us to bear witness to it. For this purpose, the Holy Spirit comes to us again at our Confirmation with further gifts that give power to faith.

This bearing witness to Christ that expresses our faith includes the readiness to follow the Lord along the way of the Cross amidst the hurts and persecutions, which the Church and her members never lack. As our Lord said, *“So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.”* The “living water” our Lord referred to has been poured into our hearts. Let us live by that divine Spirit. We do so by living our faith daily, and bearing witness to it before others.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*,
no.1814-1816 (The Theological Virtues: Faith); 1262-1274
(Faith and the effects of Baptism)



Monday of the Third week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Ps 84 (83):3 My soul is longing and yearning for the courts of the Lord. My heart and my flesh cry out to the living God.

Collect May your unfailing compassion, O Lord, cleanse and protect your Church, and, since without you she cannot stand secure, may she be always governed by your grace. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Kings 5: 1-15; Psalms 41/42;

Luke 4:24-30

Jesus said, I tell you the truth, no prophet is accepted in his home town. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon.

And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed — only Naaman the Syrian. All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way. (Luke 4:24-30)

Attachment to sin There has been archaeological work done on the settlement of Nazareth as it was in the era of Jesus of Nazareth. The village had a history, together with lapses in settlement, it seems. I am not aware of any reference to Nazareth in ancient records or inscriptions outside of its connection with Christ. The much discussed Nazareth Inscription (with its 14-line “Edict of Caesar” prescribing capital punishment for body stealing) was possibly occasioned by talk, reaching Rome, of the empty tomb and Christ’s resurrection. There is no doubt that Jesus of Nazareth gave the village a renown that will last till the end of time. Christ was its greatest son,

one who had no peer, and outside of him Nazareth would have had no special significance. On being told by Philip that the Messiah was in their midst, and that he was Jesus of Nazareth, Nathanael asked, “*Can anything good come from Nazareth?*” (John 1:46). In the Gospel of St Luke, our Lord returns to his home village after the commencement of his public ministry — we are not told when this is, although Luke places it early. It is to be noted that Mark speaks of a return of our Lord to Nazareth (ch. 6: 1-6), but there is no mention of an expulsion and attempt on his life. So there may have been more than one visit, and Luke’s account may combine at least two visits, with the second one including all the drama. So then, Luke writes that Jesus returned to Galilee after his baptism and temptations in the wilderness, and began to preach in the synagogues. “*Then he came back to Nazareth where he had been brought up; and he went into the synagogue there, as his custom was, on the Sabbath day.*” The whole episode is given some sixteen verses by St Luke, and the upshot of the visit (or visits) home was remarkable. I find

it difficult to imagine that there was any direct parallel in the village's entire history. Our Lord went into the synagogue where he had been going for some thirty years, among clan members and fellow townsmen, and made his declaration that he was the promised Messiah. He warned the congregation that the test ahead of them was one of faith, and that they were unlikely to pass that test. The upshot was that he would have been lynched were it not for his personal command of the situation. They rose up, angrily confronted him, and not content with throwing him out of the synagogue they hustled him ahead of them to a local precipice. There they would have killed him had they been able to. But he "*passed through the midst of them*" and went on his way, making Capernaum his base thereafter.

I doubt that there had been a similar instance of this in the village's history. It took the revelation of who Jesus really was to bring their true colours to light. It is an amazing incident, and it bore out the truth of Nathanael's passing observation: "*Can any good come from Nazareth?*"

However, much good did come forth from Nazareth. The town contained the holiest trio in all of human history: Jesus himself, and Mary his mother, and previous to this event, Joseph his foster-father. There is some evidence to think that among our Lord's Apostles and disciples were some relatives. Some of these *may* have come from Nazareth. So, as with some of the scribes and Pharisees and leaders of the people, there would have been some at Nazareth who responded in faith. But this terrible reaction on the part of his own was yet another instance of what St John states in the Prologue of his Gospel, that the Word made flesh *came unto his own and his own did not receive him*. It is this which reveals the evil and the power of sin. There are various ways of appreciating the evil of sin. We can think of its terrible effects on the moral constitution of man. Sin corrupts him and brings about a collapse of his moral life. We can think of its effects on the entire history of man. The Book of Genesis describes the entry of sin into the world at the beginning, and the rest of the Old Testament describes the story of sin and death flowing

from it. We can think of its effects on man's eternal lot: it results in damnation forever if it is serious un-repented sin. Or, most of all, we can contemplate the effect of man's sin on Jesus Christ. He who was utterly sinless was made to suffer indescribably. Christ's rejection by the people of Nazareth was one of several instances of this described in the Gospel. Its final sequel would be the Crucifixion. Christ stood there in the synagogue before his own townsmen, revealing who he was and the good things he would do for them. He warned them of their pride. They must be on guard against the temptation not to believe. Two things stand out in our Gospel scene: the love of Christ in revealing himself to them, and their great sin in rejecting this revelation and this love. Especially does our passage reveal to us what sin can lead to — and this sin lies within each of us.

Christ warned his townspeople against the sin of *non-belief*. Let us take heed of his warning, indeed, let us consider it a warning against all deliberate sin. Lent is the time of turning away from sin, whether mortal or venial.

We must be on guard against any conscious attachment to sin. We may be attached to holding on to unnecessary wealth when in the face of the poverty of others. We may be attached to harbouring resentments and to the refusal to forgive. We may be attached to sloth. Whatever sins we are secretly holding on to must be renounced. Let us then take our stand with Jesus, and make him our great means of combating sin and living for God.

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Second reflection: (Luke 4:24-30)

Taking the Faith for granted Let us consider this event, involving our Lord's own townspeople. They had lived with him all those years as he had been growing up, together with Joseph and Mary his mother. At the very least they were quite familiar with how excellent a Person he was. This of itself required no leap of faith — it was a fact before their eyes. There is a danger that to a large extent in our religion we can simply go on what we see and on what we are used to thinking, and being content with

that. Our mind can proceed day by day along certain familiar lines, without our faith being exercised on the many greater realities of our Catholic Faith. We may not really be exercising much faith in, for instance, the Eucharist whenever we enter the church, nor, perhaps, in the divine character of the Sacraments, such as the Sacrament of Penance. We may be making no real effort to recognise in faith what they are, or rather, who they are — Jesus Christ. We may not be living much by *faith*.

What we ought to do is actively to exercise our faith on the full range of the creed and what God has revealed, reading and meditating on this teaching, allowing it to form our inner being, and making acts of faith accordingly. Let us open our hearts and minds to the fullness of Christ's teaching as it comes to us in the voice of the Church, which is the oracle of God. Hearing it, let us actively accept it as the revelation of God sent to guide us to holiness and to heaven.



Tuesday of the Third week in Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16):6, 8 To you I call, for you will surely heed me, O God; turn your ear to me; hear my words. Guard me as the apple of your eye; in the shadow of your wings protect me.

Collect May your grace not forsake us, O Lord, we pray, but make us dedicated to your holy service and at all times obtain for us your help. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Daniel 3:25.34-43; Psalm 24;
Matthew 18: 21-35

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times? Jesus answered, I tell you, not seven times, but seventy seven times. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him

ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until

he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart. (Matthew 18:21-35)

Forgive! Our Gospel today speaks of forgiveness. In popular classical religion, while the gods had power they were not notably good. By means of religion, man turned their power to his own benefit, but liberation from sin scarcely came into it. If sin as such was to be taken away, it would have to be taken away from the gods as well. In any case the gods did not especially care for man — they had more important things to do among themselves. Plato and Aristotle went a long way towards purifying the notion and image of the gods, but at the cost of a divine involvement with and concern for man. The net result of their speculations on the gods (as in, say, Aristotle's Pure Act) was an even greater distance between the divine and the human. The sins of man, and forgiveness for those sins, is absent from the Pure Act of Aristotle, principally because the Pure Act is above all this, and scarcely condescends to think of man. Whether at the level of

popular myth and cult or at the level of philosophy, for various reasons the classical pagan portrayal of the gods did not notably include forgiveness. This is consonant with Aristotle's portrayal of the virtuous man. The virtuous man is high-minded and magnanimous, and because he is such, he pardons. He is above all thoughts of revenge — a little after the manner in which the divine is beyond being preoccupied with the world. The magnanimous and virtuous man will be ready to help others, but will not ask for help himself. In respect to forgiveness, he will not bear grudges, but the reason for all this is his desire to preserve his own (admirable) honour and virtue. It is a nobler thing to put aside thoughts about what one is owed. It is a matter of personal honour, and, truth to tell, the desire to be honoured by society. There is lacking in this a true, humble and active engagement with the person being forgiven. Now, even though the Christian can see the limitations in this ethical system, great credit is due to the distance in moral understanding that was reached. There was the idea of a morally admirable man, and much of

Aristotle's achievement was incorporated by Aquinas. But of course it was much surpassed — as is to be expected — by divine revelation, and in particular by the teaching of Jesus Christ. True forgiveness was revealed by Christ to be a central virtue of the virtuous man.

In our Gospel parable today, forgiveness is shown as being essential for virtue. The first thing which stands out in divine revelation when set against the religions of mankind, especially classical religion, is that God really does forgive sin. While in classical religion moral wrongdoing was not much of an offence against the gods (for they lived in a completely other world), in divine revelation not only is it an offence against God — a “sin” — but God in his omnipotence can forgive all sins. Importantly, he is revealed as mightily disposed to do so if only man would be contrite. Our Lord repeatedly forgave sins and he gave this very power to his Apostles. As a matter of fact, the work of God the Son made man was to take away the sin of the world: to pardon, to forgive. This was the first commission he gave to the Apostles on rising

from the dead — “*whose sins you forgive they are forgiven them.*” But there is a further step in this new dispensation. Not only can and does Christ forgive sin, not only does he empower his Church to forgive sin, but he enables us by his grace to forgive others for their “sins” against us. Our Gospel today (Matthew 18: 21-35) shows that the thought of God’s forgiveness of us should help us to forgive others. In a separate parable, the Prodigal Son returned to his father and said, “*Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.*” He asked his father for sufficient forgiveness to be received back as a hired servant, but the father gave him his entire forgiveness. The picture of the virtuous man as embodied in the father of the Prodigal Son is vastly different from the picture of the virtuous man painted by the greatest Greek philosophers. He does not condescend to forgive merely because it is the virtuous thing to do. He does so in an abandon of humble love for his stricken son. He sweeps him up in his loving embrace, and showers him with the forgiveness he is seeking. In our Gospel parable today the evil man refuses to forgive, after the good king

has forgiven all his debts. That king is a picture of the great God, the Lord of heaven and earth — Christ's eternal Father. God willingly forgives us our debts if we cast ourselves on his mercy — but he expects that we shall try to be like him and forgive others. We are solemnly commanded to be true children of our heavenly Father.

It can be said that divine revelation brought to the world not only a new idea of God but a new idea of man, man made in his image. Just as at the heart of the new idea of God was love and forgiveness, so too at the heart of the idea of man which heaven announced was a love which expresses itself in mercy and forgiveness. The good man is the man who forgives not seven times, but seventy-seven times. That is, he must forgive always, and from the heart. Thus did the king forgive the servant who was impossibly indebted to him, and thus does God forgive us. We must we do the same for one another. Let us make this our ambition for love of Christ, to forgive without stint and to the end.

Second reflection: (Matthew 18:21-35)

Forgiveness One of the very toughest requirements of the Christian life is that of forgiveness. The disciple of Christ must be prepared to forgive without limit. The question is, how is this to be done? Firstly, it is to be done out of love for Christ, and because he wants it of us. That he wants it is plain across the pages of the Gospel. It is the point of our passage today, which is the parable of the unforgiving servant. It is specifically required in the Lord's Prayer. Our desire to please our Lord and do what he commands should lead us to perseveringly forgive injuries. Secondly, we can be helped to forgive if we maintain a lively sense of the scale of offence against God that our own sins represent. And this is where modern secular man fails — he lacks a sense of sin. Our Lord shows the importance of this in the parable we are considering here (Matthew 18:21-35). The servant who owes ten thousand talents to his forgiving master refuses to

forgive his fellow servant who owes him one hundred denarii. Our debt to God because of our sins is unimaginably enormous, yet he readily forgives. We have little sense of the enormity of our deliberate sins, and this is because we have little sense of the goodness and holiness of God. Let us strive to gain this — it will help us forgive those who trespass against us.

What a wonderful thing to go to God at the end of life having forgiven everyone their offences against us. We will succeed in doing this if we aim to do just this every single day — and at the end of every day to forgive everyone.



Wednesday of the Third week in Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 119 (118):133 Let my steps be guided by your promise; may evil never rule me.

Collect Grant, we pray, O Lord, that, schooled through Lenten observance and nourished by your word, through holy restraint we may be devoted to you with all our heart and be ever united in prayer. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Deuteronomy 4:5-9; Psalm 147;

Matthew 5:17-19

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the

same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever puts into practice and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:17-19)

Christ and the Scriptures Let us think of that forlorn Sunday morning, the first day of the week following a most sombre Sabbath, when two men were walking from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus. They were joined by a stranger. We know the sequel. The two explained to him that “*Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and the people*” had been delivered up to death by “*the chief priests and our rulers,*” who had him crucified. This was a great prophet! — it had been a catastrophic outcome, and the light had gone from their lives. Now, what had led to this terrible event? Pilate, we are told, saw very clearly that it was due to *envy* that Jesus had been handed over to him. But we know from the pages of the Gospel that their accusation was that he was leading the people astray. Time and again he rejected their interpretation of the Law and the Prophets. They

repeatedly attacked his flouting of what they required for the observance of the Sabbath rest. He did and said things, they claimed, which went counter to the inspired writings on God himself — he forgave sins, and he called God his own Father. He was looming as the very centre of Revealed Religion, claiming supreme authority in all that pertained to God. In a word, their charge — or pretext, for it was inspired by an implacable *envy* — was that he did not respect the Law and the Prophets. He was therefore a spurious prophet, with some saying he was in league with the demons. In Deuteronomy 18: 20 we read that the false prophet who presumes to speak in God's name shall die. To all of this — apart from the witness of his own manifest holiness — our Lord replies in the words of today's Gospel, *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished”* (Matthew 5: 17-19). Our

Lord loved the Law and the Prophets — they were the work of the Holy Spirit. Let us dwell on this point. As that walk to Emmaus continued, our Lord would use the beloved Scriptures to illustrate the true path of the Messiah.

Our Lord's love for and repeated use of the Scriptures ought to inspire in us a love for the Holy Scriptures. Week after week at Nazareth during those years of his childhood, his youth and manhood, he went to the Sabbath to hear the reading of the Scriptures. Let us imagine him accompanying his mother and foster-father to the village Synagogue, listening to the readings and to the comment on them. Little did the people of the village know who they had in their midst! Then once his public ministry began, he in his turn Sabbath after Sabbath spoke in the Synagogues, reading the Scriptures and speaking on their meaning. We are referring here to his reading the Law and the Prophets, and commenting on their true meaning. Of this, of course, he was the Master without peer. Time and again his enemies fiercely pounded him with questions, attempting to trap him in what he was saying. Their

questions ranged widely. Which among the vast number of commandments in the Scriptures is the greatest? He answered all questions without hesitation, and won praise. How could there be a resurrection, if it meant that a woman could be married to as many as seven husbands in the life to come? So it went on, but it reached a point where, we are told, *they asked him no more questions*. He was unconquerable in the area of revealed religion. All that the Temple aristocracy and their associates could fall back on was secret scheming. Any confrontation with him in the presence of the people was hopeless. The point I am making here, though, is *our Lord's love for and absolute mastery of the inspired writings*. Further, he situated his own mission within their tradition and context. There was no break from them, no replacement of them, no doing away with Moses and the Prophets. He was in their line, and his mission was to fulfil their promise. The mighty expectation which the Scriptures had set in train under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit was to be fulfilled in him. The Scriptures, then, illustrate him. They light up his

person and his mission — and we know this because our Lord himself used the Law and the Prophets to explain himself and his life, death and resurrection. In principle, they foretold it all. Let us strive to know, love and to live by the Scriptures with the mind of Jesus Christ. St Paul writes, *Let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*. Christ prayed and taught with the Scriptures in his hand. We have in our hands both the Old Testament which Christ himself used, and the New Testament which is his word. Let us love the word of God, looking on it as Søren Kierkegaard once wrote, as a letter to us from a dear friend. That Friend is God, Father, Son and Spirit. Christ fulfilled the Old Testament, and the inspired record of this fulfilment is the New. Let us never take the Scriptures for granted, nor allow them to remain long unopened.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 5: 17-19)

Christ the perfect Man Our Lord tells us that he has not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfil them. He is the fulfilment of all that God has revealed for man. He is the perfect Man, the One in whom there is nothing lacking in respect to whatever God wants of us. The good news is that not only do we have this astounding model before us as a concrete historical figure, but he has given us the wherewithal to become like him at the level of our innermost being. Christ lives now, and we can be truly like him. The purpose of life is to be thus transformed. It is through the power of Christ's grace and the Sacrament of Baptism that we become like Christ. The transformation has begun, but much work lies ahead.

Let us take up the work of seeking perfection, seeking to be like the perfect Man. So then, now I begin!



Thursday of the Third week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon I am the salvation of the people, says the Lord. Should they cry to me in any distress, I will hear them, and I will be their Lord for ever.

Collect We implore your majesty most humbly, O Lord, that, as the feast of our salvation draws ever closer, so we may press forward all the more eagerly towards the worthy celebration of the Paschal Mystery. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 7:23-28; Psalm 94;

Luke 11:14-23

Jesus was driving out a demon that was mute. When the demon left, the man who had been mute spoke, and the crowd was amazed. But some of them said, By Beelzebub, the prince of demons, he is driving out demons. Others tested him by asking for a sign from heaven. Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them: Any kingdom divided

against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall. If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand? I say this because you claim that I drive out demons by Beelzebub. Now if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your followers drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armour in which the man trusted and divides up the spoils. He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters. (Luke 11:14-3)

The great fight I remember watching an interview on television with a prominent historian of war. That was his speciality: the history of wars. The interview in question followed the great attack by al-Qaeda terrorists on the United States on September 11, 2001. They hijacked four passenger airliners and crashed them into the Twin Towers, the Pentagon, and into a field near

Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Nearly 3,000 victims and the 19 hijackers died in the attacks. I seem to recall that the historian set the attacks within the traditional Islamic method of war, which was raiding. That is, he saw its roots in the old Arabian tradition of the raiding of caravans. I only mention this as an instance of one feature of the history of kingdoms and empires, which is war. Think of war. When we think of the rise and fall of the regimes of history, we necessarily think of wars. Kingdoms war against kingdoms, and the victors prevail for a while till overcome in war by another kingdom. There are numerous factors contributing to the decline of kingdoms, and war is one of them. Now, the plan of God for the redemption of mankind is also described by the inspired writers in terms of a kingdom — a kingdom that will prevail over other kingdoms. It was promised to King David that his dynasty would never end. It would be an eternal Kingdom, which in the event proved to be a puzzle in view of the destruction and subjection of the people of God to foreign domination. Nevertheless, the conviction remained that

Israel in some sense would prevail. A Messiah was coming — and there was in the “air” of classical times talk of a great king arising in the East. In the second book of Daniel, the prophet Daniel interprets Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the succeeding kingdoms, and that there will be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron; it shall break in pieces and subdue all these others, just as iron breaks in pieces and crushes everything else (2: 40). The God of heaven “*will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed ...rather, it shall break in pieces all these kingdoms..*” (2: 44). In a sense, then, the history of wars among kingdoms is a prefiguring and reminder of the most decisive war of all — that in which *God’s kingdom will prevail forever.*

The Gospels give us the inspired record of the arrival of this kingdom of God. It will most assuredly prevail. Upon its arrival, war is declared. The contest which it faces is against one particular kingdom, the kingdom of Satan. That Satan’s is a kingdom is implied by our Lord’s words in today’s Gospel (Luke 11: 14 23). He had just cast out a demon, and the people stood amazed, but some of

them — drawn from the religious leadership — said that it was by being in league with Satan that he was able to exorcise. At this, our Lord pointed out that were this the case, it would be fatal for Satan. *“Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall. If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand? I say this because you claim that I drive out demons by Beelzebub.”* It would be an absurd method of war for Satan to set his colleagues against one another, were Christ his colleague. His “kingdom” would be ruined. This leads us to think of the methods of war employed by Satan. Our Lord once described him as a liar and a murderer from the beginning (John 8: 44). There we have two of his methods, falsehood and violence unto death. He sought to kill Christ, and by Christ’s acceptance, he succeeded. He leads people and kingdoms into untruth and self-destruction by seeking power, wealth and self-indulgence. It is clear that Satan and his kingdom is a most important element behind the rise and fall of the kingdoms of this world — and Satan claimed as much

during his exercise of tempting Christ in the wilderness. All these kingdoms you see are mine and I give them to whomsoever I please, he boasted. But Christ the King of kings and Lord of lords has arrived, and his effortless expulsion of the demon in today's Gospel is a harbinger of what is to come, and of the final scene. Christ and his kingdom is the fulfilment of Daniel and all the prophets, but what are his methods? Herein we have the surprise of the ages. The weapons of Christ are obedience unto death, self-abnegation, abandonment to the will of the Father. These are signally new weapons which the world would call weaknesses. But they are the power of God. It was by being crucified that Jesus Christ gained an eternal victory.

In our Gospel passage today our Lord makes it clear that he is the stronger man. He attacks and defeats the one in possession, and takes away all his spoils. The one who refuses to gather with him will be scattered. But let us take note of the weapons our King uses, and ask for the grace to make them our own — for they alone will bring the victory. Let us put on the mind of Jesus Christ who, being

rich from all eternity, became poor so that we might be rich. He humbled himself unto death, even death on a cross, and God raised him on high. So our sword is the Cross of Christ — let us carry it then, and be willing to stand with Jesus at Calvary.

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Second reflection: (Luke 11:14-23)

The mystery of evil In our Gospel scene (Luke 11:14-23) today, the all holy Christ was accused of casting out a demon through being in league with the prince of demons. This was said of the sinless One, whose spirit was the Holy Spirit, and whose goodness was manifest to all. “*Can any of you convict me of sin?*” he once challenged his enemies. In such a slur as this, we have an instance of the mystery of sin and of its grossness. Behind it was hatred for Christ. How can a person coming from the creative hand of the all-holy God choose to hate his Lord? And

Jesus is this Lord. Let us be warned, then, as we contemplate this evil reaction to Jesus by some in the crowd. The heart of man can be profoundly perverted and infested by sin. In one of her visions, St Teresa of Avila was shown her place in hell — where, she was thereby warned, it was not impossible that she could finally be.

Let us then take up the work of unmasking, fighting, and overcoming the sin that lies deep within our own fallen heart. We must renounce this sin and Satan with it. We must fight against any attachments to sin, and we must gather with Jesus. If we do not, we shall be scattered.



Friday of the Third week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Ps 86 (85):8, 10 Among the gods there is none like you, O Lord, for you are great and do marvellous deeds; you alone are God.

Collect Pour your grace into our hearts, we pray, O Lord, that we may be constantly drawn away from unruly desires and obey by your own gift the heavenly teaching you give us. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Hosea 14:2-10; Psalm 80;

Mark 12:28-34

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, Of all the commandments, which is the most important? The most important one, answered Jesus, is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and

with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these. Well said, teacher, the man replied. You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices. When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, You are not far from the kingdom of God. And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions. (Mark 12:28-34)

With all our heart Many different goals face each person as he or she sets out on life, even though the drama of this may not strike home. A man is born into a particular family, within a particular culture and society, and various goals grow on him — perhaps mainly by force of circumstances. He is urged to study hard, or to do well at sport, or to get on well with his acquaintances. Time passes, he begins to take up certain goals, and the direction

of his life takes shape. He aims at marrying, settling down, raising a family, securing sufficient income for this purpose — and that is what his life will be as he envisions it. Alternatively, his concentration could be on success in a chosen profession. He is enamoured of sporting success, or he could aim to have a successful business — say, a real estate business which he plans to extend. In all of these things he might remember God, or he might not. As the years pass, it slowly dawns on him that life is short — it has passed quickly. His childhood has gone, as has his adolescence, and early manhood. He has married, has children and now finds himself in middle age. Perhaps the fundamental chance, the most important opportunity, has passed him by. What is that? It is the chance of friendship with God and of living out one's days in the service of him. Each person has but one shot, one life to live, one run of the race, one attempt at the wheel. After that, it is all over forever with no turning back. It will then all be gone, never to be seen again. It is critical, then, that each be alive to the fundamental opportunity ahead — and that relates to

God. However, there is something more. There are great numbers of persons who make this right choice that I have been referring to. They would never allow themselves to *forget* God. But the issue is, is this as far as they will go? Will they coast along as religious persons, or will they give to God their “best shot”? There are indeed many who give to their chosen goals their “best shot.” So then, while some have forgotten God and others have not, the question is, who, having understood the minimum requirement that God must not be forgotten, *give to him their all?*

This is the issue, because it is actually not an option as far as God is concerned. We are God’s creatures, and he is, from an ontological perspective, our life and our all — we depend on him radically and totally. Our very being is his gift, moment by moment. If we wish to live and to flourish as well, it can only be on the basis of doing the will of our Creator, and with love. He has condescended to give us his friendship, indeed his love. He sent his only-begotten Son to die for each of us that we might live forever with him. Now, God commands us not merely to

remember and acknowledge him, but to *love* him. Further, this love must be absolutely *total*. It is to be the work of life, to attain a perfect love for God our Creator, our Father and our Redeemer. We are required to give this our “best shot.” In our Gospel today (Mark 12: 28-34), our Lord is asked what the foremost of God’s commandments is. Is it, say, the Sabbath rest? Or would it be the care of the stranger, or the honour that we must give to our parents? Or would it be that no other god must ever be allowed? All these and very many besides were commanded in the Scriptures. Which, though is the most important? Which is the *great* commandment? It must have been a pressing matter for the scholars of the Law and for those instructing the people because the sacred books contained numerous religious injunctions. It is a pressing matter for each of us too. Jesus Christ gives us the answer. The foremost duty imposed on us by the living God is that we work at the perfection of love for him. “*The most important one, answered Jesus, is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your*

heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” A religious person can spend the years of his or her life serving God, but failing to work at *loving* him the more, and giving to him the very *best*. Christ wants us to struggle at the perfection of love. It will not do to reach a certain level, and thereafter to coast along. He wants us to be pressing on the accelerator and speeding up.

The challenge of every marriage and of every good friendship is, how far shall I go in this? Am I prepared to give it my very best, and to be open to light on how this is to be done? Far more so is this the case in religion. The challenge for the person who lives for this life forgetful of God, is to discover the true Reality for whom he should be living. The challenge for the person who knows and loves God is to resist mediocrity. Christ asks of each of us that we seek to love and serve God to our fullest capacity. He wants all our heart, our whole mind, soul and strength — as expressed in the loving fulfilment of his daily will. Let

us take up this greatest of adventures and duties. It will take us to life everlasting.

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Second reflection: (Mark 12:28-34)

What we have to live for Occasionally we hear of people who have very little to live for, or so they believe. Perhaps it is because the great things they had possessed and had been living for — their family, their work, their business, or whatever — had been taken away from them. Perhaps they had never discovered anything they could live for. Whatever be the case, God has revealed that no matter what our circumstances, there is something absolutely fundamental that every single person is called to live for — the love of God. We have a great object in life, and it is to work at the total love of God in our life, and in God, the love for others. We are to work at the perfection of love.

Every occasion, every circumstance, is to be turned to account, turned into an occasion when we love God with all our heart, and others in Him.

This perfection of love is a very great work that requires the application of all our powers. It is the work of a lifetime. It is God's command to us, it is our happiness, and it is our calling.



Saturday of the Third week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Ps 103 (102):2-3 Bless the Lord, O my soul, and never forget all his benefits; it is he who forgives all your sins.

Collect Rejoicing in this annual celebration of our Lenten observance, we pray, O Lord, that, with our hearts set on the paschal mysteries, we may be gladdened by their full effects. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Hosea 6:1-6; Psalm 50; Luke 18:9-14

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men- robbers, evildoers, adulterers- or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a

tenth of all I get.’ But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. (Luke: 18:9-14)

The conscience There are many things, of course, that distinguish man from the animals — and many things which both have in common. The common definition that “man is a rational animal” acknowledges one major difference — his rationality — and places this in the context of the many things he has in common with animals. Man is an “animal” with rationality. But his rationality is not the only difference. Many would place just as much emphasis on his religious character. He acknowledges God or the gods, and this pervades his life. Another difference, part and parcel of his rationality (understood broadly), is that man has a conscience. An animal has no idea of right and wrong. So when an animal

attacks and kills a human being, it is not tried in a court of law and sentenced to prison or death. It is not “executed,” rather it is “put down.” The animal cannot help itself — it is driven by its instincts and has no sense of what *should* be done. The animal is not “blamed” — whereas its owner might be, or those looking after the reserve, or any other human beings who overlooked something in wildlife management, or the tourists themselves. Allowing for some aberrations, all men have a conscience, which is to say a sense of right and wrong which to a greater or lesser extent they translate into practical judgments and decisions. Man is aware that there is such a thing as right and wrong, that he should do certain things and avoid others. He is also aware of the numerous times he has failed to live according to what he knows to be right. He has a guilty conscience. But there is another important feature of this common element of conscience in man. The sense of right and wrong seems to lead very many people to the thought of God. Our conscience, telling us to do this or that, includes in its dictate the sense that is the echo of a Voice

within, yet beyond. While the analysis of this is tricky and elusive, by and large people have the sense that the conscience is sacred, ultimate, and, vaguely, the voice of God. If one were to say that this is an illusion or a mere manner of speaking — well, at the very least this would be saying that “40,000 Frenchmen” are wrong, and that there is no authority in “the voice of mankind.”

Cardinal Newman, in his *Sermon Notes* (“The Pharisee and the Publican” — July 24, 1864), comments on the prayer of the Publican and its admission of sin. He writes that in the appeal, “God be merciful to me a sinner” there is contained the essence of true religion. The words of this prayer refer to the conscience leading a person to God. Newman notes that all men have a conscience (i.e., a consciousness) of right and wrong (Rom. 2: 14-15), but in some it does not lead them, when they transgress it, to God. They are, rather, angry with themselves. They know they are wrong, and are distressed, but it does not lead them to religion; at the utmost it leads them to understand a sin against their neighbours — such as cruelty, etc. But when

it leads the soul to think of God, then that soul may be very sinful, but at least it has something of true religion in it. Now, what this comment of Newman's suggests is that while all have a "conscience," which includes a sense of guilt, their religion will turn on their readiness to perceive in this an echo of the judgment of God. The instinct of conscience is to accept this in some sense, but other considerations can lead a person quietly to reject the thought. So then, the thought of a living God is within the reach of everyone, and that thought is contained in the dictate and feeling of conscience. The Publican of our parable gives a picture of the proper and healthy functioning of the conscience. He had done wrong, and his conscience made him aware of it. He instinctively understood that his sense of guilt manifested the judgment of God. As a result he raised his mind and heart to God, asking for mercy. In his sinfulness, the Publican represents mankind. In his acknowledgment of sin before God, and in his prayer for pardon, he shows what the conscience can do for man if it is interpreted aright. It can lead him to God.

Due to the blessing of his conscience, the Publican prayed in the light. He saw his true situation, which was that of a sinner before God. He was able, with head bowed in the presence of God, to appeal for mercy. The conscience was his friend, for it took him in his sins before God. By contrast, the Pharisee, who was also a sinner, had gradually blinded his conscience, which God places in us as our friend.

Let us not fear to examine our consciences regularly, indeed, daily. If we have no sense of guilt, let us fear lest we be somewhat like the Pharisee. If we do have a sense of guilt, let us acknowledge this but in the presence of God, which our conscience will also tend to suggest to us. It is not difficult to pray the prayer of the Publican, and our conscience is our friend in the doing of this. Cardinal Newman once famously called the conscience the “aboriginal Vicar of Christ.” That is to say, it is the representative of Christ within our very nature, bringing us to him who is the One who takes away the sin of the world. Let us treasure the prayer of the Publican. It should be —

if our conscience is functioning properly — easy to pray.
It will take us to God.

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Second reflection: (Hosea 6:1-6)

God of love At times it has been said that God as portrayed in the Old Testament is a God of judgment and punishment, whereas by contrast God as portrayed in the New Testament is a God of love and mercy. It is true that the love and mercy of God is given its full revelation in the New Testament (as is the judgment and punishment of God). But it is not true that God does not reveal his love and mercy in the Old. There is a gradual revelation of the nature of God in both the Old and the New. Some of the clearest Old Testament revelations of God's love and mercy (together with his judgments) are to be found in the prophets — one instance being the book of the prophet Hosea. In our passage today (Hosea 6:1-6), God appeals to

his people for their love, while reminding them of his judgments. God wants the love of his people, not just their animal sacrifices. God can be depended on for his mercy, even though he has punished his people for their sins. The pattern of God's punishment and mercy is described — *“He has torn us to pieces, but he will heal us; he has struck us down, but he will bandage our wounds; after a day or two he will bring us back to life, on the third day he will raise us and we shall live in his presence.”* Two days of punishment, and then a third when the people will be raised to life. This would be exemplified in the Messiah.

Jesus bore the weight of the sins of the world, and on the third day he rose. Our Lord's passion, death and resurrection was the supreme revelation of the Father's love.



Fourth Sunday of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Is 66:10-11 Rejoice, Jerusalem, and all who love her. Be joyful, all who were in mourning; exult and be satisfied at her consoling breast.

Collect O God, who through your Word reconcile the human race to yourself in a wonderful way, grant, we pray, that with prompt devotion and eager faith the Christian people may hasten toward the solemn celebrations to come. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Samuel 16:1.6-7.10-13; Psalm 22;
Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? Neither this man nor his parents sinned, said Jesus, but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life. As long as it is

day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world. Having said this, he spat on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. Go, he told him, wash in the Pool of Siloam (this word means Sent). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing. His neighbours and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg? Some claimed that he was. Others said, No, he only looks like him. But he himself insisted, I am the man. How then were your eyes opened? they demanded. He replied, The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see. Where is this man? they asked him. I don't know, he said. They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man's eyes was a Sabbath. Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. He put mud on my eyes, the man replied, and I washed,

and now I see. Some of the Pharisees said, This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath. But others asked, How can a sinner do such miraculous signs? So they were divided. Finally they turned again to the blind man, What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened. The man replied, He is a prophet. The Jews still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man's parents. Is this your son? they asked. Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see? We know he is our son, the parents answered, and we know he was born blind. But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don't know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself. His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for already the Jews had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Christ would be put out of the synagogue. That was why his parents said, He is of age; ask him. A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. Give glory to God, they said. We know this man is a sinner. He replied, Whether he is a sinner or

not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see! Then they asked him, What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes? He answered, I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too? Then they hurled insults at him and said, You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses! We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from. The man answered, Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing. To this they replied, You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us! And they threw him out. Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, Do you believe in the Son of Man? Who is he, sir? the man asked. Tell me so that I may believe in him. Jesus said, You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one

speaking with you. Then the man said, Lord, I believe, and he worshipped him. Jesus said, For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind. Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, What? Are we blind too? Jesus said, If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains. (John 9:1-41)

Christ the light Years ago when I was engaged in missionary work in Peru, I once was coming home on horseback from one of the villages I had been visiting. Night fell, and I had to make the rest of my way back in darkness, on foot, pulling my horse behind me. The ground was rocky and full of bushes impeding my way. There was no moon, no lights anywhere. Finally in the distance I saw the light of a farm. It was a tremendous blessing to see that light, so small, so far off but something to head for, because I simply could not see my way. I had no light in the darkness. Let that be a little parable. There is an intriguing feature of human knowledge. It is that

people can be absolutely certain they are right precisely when they are in absolute contradiction with one another. A Christian who is quite certain that Jesus Christ is the Son of God is confronted by a Muslim who is quite certain that Jesus Christ is but a prophet — and not the greatest of them anyway. Each thinks he is certain of his position, but at least one of them has to be in error. So it is quite possible to think that one is in the light of truth while one is in the darkness of error. Not only is it possible, but it is common. Christ described himself as the light of the world — the whole world! Without him, then, we are in the dark in respect to what Christ came to offer, which is the knowledge of the triune God and our salvation. As fallen human beings, we shall think we are in the light. We shall not realize that, of ourselves, we are to a large extent blind. It is an extraordinary situation we are in, because it is so unlike our physical sight. We see things with our eyes, and know when we are in the dark and are unable to see at all. Perhaps it is because of the relative reliability of physical sight that we assume that our spiritual sight is similarly

dependable. But we can be tragically deceived. Our Lord in today's Gospel passage (John 9:1-41) tells us quite plainly that there is only one light for the whole world, one light in those things that concern the way to reach God and attain heaven. Without that light the whole world is in darkness. Only he is that Light: "*As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.*"

Consider the numerous religions of man. They bear tribute to the grandeur of man, and yet how distant from and often contradictory to what Christ has revealed, are many of their teachings! Of course, very many of their teachings contain truth. Inasmuch as Christ states that he is the light of the world, and elsewhere that no-one can access the Father except through him, this has implications for the religions of man. It is that whatever truth there is in the religions of man that *avails to our salvation* and eternal destiny with God, must come from the Spirit of Christ graciously assisting. Those elements of *saving* truth, if they are there, are seeds of the word of God scattered there by the divine mercy. However, they are but seeds in

comparison with the lush forest of divine truth present in what Christ has entrusted to the Church. We who are baptized have been mercifully blessed with this light of Christ. We have been baptised into his Church, and have received the gift of the Holy Spirit and the light of his grace and his teaching. Now, it is very easy for us to take all this for granted. We ought try to appreciate the immense treasure that we have, this light and grace of Christ that is able to flood our minds, our hearts and our souls. Let us but think of the great numbers who have not this light. Thinking of them, we ought thank God for the gift of our faith putting us in union with Christ the light of the world. But we must resolve to make this light shine, and be at work within us. For this we have the wonderful help of the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Blessed Trinity who has been given to us to guide us, to enlighten us with Christ's teaching, and to inspire us to follow it with all the generosity we can summon. As we look back on our life, let us recognise that we have failed to let this light shine brightly. So let us begin again. We have the Holy

Spirit dwelling within us as in a Temple. He enlightens our intellect and our conscience as to the meaning and the bearing of Christ's teaching, and he wishes to inspire us to follow it generously. Let us learn to be taught and led by the Holy Spirit, the gift of Christ. Our life must be this, one that is led by the Spirit of Christ.

The Holy Spirit is our divine friend and he dwells within us as within his home. He abides there in order to make saints of us, if we will but be guided by him. He makes us holy by means of the word of God and the sacraments. But if this is to happen, we must accept Christ as our light. That light of Christ is proclaimed in the Scriptures and in the Church's preaching and teaching. Guided by this light, let us devoutly receive the sacraments, especially the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. Aided by the Holy Spirit, let us resolve to be faithful to him who is the Light of the world, being ever ready to be led by it.



Monday of the Fourth week in Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 31 (30):7-8 As for me, I trust in the Lord. Let me be glad and rejoice in your mercy, for you have seen my affliction.

Collect O God, who renew the world through mysteries beyond all telling, grant, we pray, that your Church may be guided by your eternal design and not be deprived of your help in this present age. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 65:17-21; Psalm 29; John 4:43-54

After two days Jesus left for Galilee. (Now Jesus himself had pointed out that a prophet has no honour in his own country.) When he arrived in Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him. They had seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, for they also had been there. Once more he visited Cana in Galilee, where he had turned the water into wine. And there was a certain royal

official whose son lay sick at Capernaum. When this man heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and begged him to come and heal his son, who was close to death. Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders, Jesus told him, you will never believe. The royal official said, Sir, come down before my child dies. Jesus replied, You may go. Your son will live. The man took Jesus at his word and departed. While he was still on the way, his servants met him with the news that his boy was living. When he enquired as to the time when his son got better, they said to him, The fever left him yesterday at the seventh hour. Then the father realised that this was the exact time at which Jesus had said to him, Your son will live. So he and all his household believed. This was the second miraculous sign that Jesus performed, having come from Judea to Galilee. (John 4:43-54)

Grace One of the distinctive features of the Christian religion is that it is historical. While it presents itself as an answer to man's truest religious longings — especially the longing for friendship with God and

cleansing from sin — nevertheless it is grounded in history. If we had lived at the time, we would have seen the events that are narrated. So it is that the Christian's piety relishes the memory of what then happened, as given to us in the Gospels. We repeatedly remember what happened in the past, and these memories, sustained by the Gospel accounts, nourish our faith in Jesus Christ. This essentially historical character of the Christian religion leads the Christian to be deeply interested in what actually happened, even though there are many frustrations ahead in trying to reconstruct it. Let us then try to reconstruct a few things in relation to our Gospel today. We notice that in his Gospel, St John seems to contrast our Lord's reception in Jerusalem and Judea with that of Samaria and Galilee. John's account of our Lord's ministry begins with Christ going to Judea to be baptized by John the Baptist. There he meets his first disciples, who, coincidentally, come from Galilee. He returns to Galilee and works the first of his miracles at Cana. He let his glory be seen and his disciples believed in him. Having moved to Capernaum, he went up

to Jerusalem for the Passover. There he cleansed the Temple, taught there, and was confronted by “the Jews,” — the religious authorities based in the Temple. There were those who believed in him, including some among the very leaders (such as Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea), but we get the impression that it was in Jerusalem that our Lord met his main resistance. By contrast, he had an excellent response from at least some Samaritans, and a fairly good response from the cosmopolitan Galileans. John presents our Lord going back and forth from Galilee to Jerusalem, and it seems to me that one feature of this is a contrast John wishes to bring out between the acceptance and non-acceptance of Jesus Christ. It is as if John is presenting a seminal pattern of what will be later manifest, that the Church will be drawn mainly though by no means exclusively from those far from the heart of Judaism. God’s grace has surprising wins, and has a long reach.

Let us take the point further. Our Lord has just come from Samaria where “*many more believed because of his*

word.” They believed not just because of the word of the Samaritan woman but because of what they heard Jesus say — and as a result they knew (*oidamen*) “*that this man is truly the Saviour of the world*” (John 4: 42). It was a stark contrast with the response of Jerusalem. And so our Lord returns to Galilee, and “*the Galileans received him*” for they had seen what he had done in Jerusalem. With that, he came once again to Cana in Galilee, where earlier, at the request of his mother, he had changed the water into wine. This time an official of the *court* (*basilikos*) came to him to plead the case of his son who was dangerously ill at Capernaum. We are in Galilee, so it is at least possible that this man was connected with the *court of Herod Antipas*, the tetrarch of Galilee. Challenged by our Lord as to his faith, he responded by appealing to Jesus to do something for his son. At this, our Lord told him to go — his son would live. He believed, set off for home, and we read that he and his entire family believed. Of course, we do not know who this man was for the simple reason that John does not tell us. But we do notice that in Luke 8: 3, among

the women who assisted our Lord and the disciples in their demanding work of preaching in every town and village was Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward. Was the man who spoke to Jesus and who subsequently believed, Chuza, the husband of Joanna? We cannot tell, but it is not impossible. Chuza of course had his work at Herod's court to do, and so, were *he* the disciple at Herod's court whose son was cured, he could not follow our Lord physically among the towns and villages. But his wife may have, as a profoundly grateful disciple — and with Chuza's active encouragement. Chuza may also have told her to assist our Lord generously with provisions. Moreover, we do know that Herod himself came to hear of our Lord, and in his superficial manner wanted to see him. His interest may have been aroused by Chuza speaking of our Lord at the court — with the intent of bearing witness to our Lord before the benighted Antipas. Joanna observed our Lord dying on the cross (Luke 23:49), and was certainly at the tomb when told by the angels of his resurrection (Luke 24:1-10).

The point I am drawing out here is that faith in our Lord can be found in unlikely places. As said earlier, grace has a long reach, and surprising wins. Jerusalem, the apple of God's eye, was not distinguished in its response to the Son of God. He came unto his own, and his own received him not. It was from Galilee that he received his closest disciples. It was in Samaria that he received at least one excellent response, as did Stephen later on (Acts 8: 6). In our Gospel today (John 4: 43-54), a man of the court — probably that of Herod — became a believer, together with all his household. In Acts 13:1 we read that Manaen, brought up with Herod the tetrarch (possibly as a friend or even foster-brother), was among the teachers of the Church at Antioch. I wonder if Chuza had anything to do with *Manaen's* conversion by speaking to him of Jesus. All this is imaginative conjecture. Let us, though, entrust ourselves to the grace of God, seeing its power at work in the Sacred Scriptures.

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Second reflection: (John 4:43-54)

Faith in Jesus It is clear from our Lord's words in today's Gospel (John 4: 43-54) that everything depends on faith in him: "*So you will not believe unless you see signs and wonders*", he said to the synagogue official. Our Lord worked numerous and striking miracles in order to elicit faith, but it is clear that he did not want faith in him to depend on miracles. So what is faith to depend on? Faith in Jesus, and in who he is, is a gift from God. We see this in our Lord's declaration to Simon who had said that he, Jesus, was the Messiah the Son of God. Flesh and blood had not revealed this to Simon, but the Father in heaven. Faith is a gift from God. But also it depends on our trying to get to know Jesus personally. For example, we remember how the two disciples of John the Baptist followed Jesus and stayed with him for the rest of that day. The next day one of them, Andrew by name, went to find his brother Simon and told him that they had found the Messiah. They had come to know and accept this — they

had arrived at faith — because they took the effort to be with Jesus and to come to know him.

We must spend time with Jesus if we hope to arrive at a deep faith in him. We must spend time with him in prayer, getting to know him personally, and exercising our faith in that context. Blessed are they, the risen Jesus told Thomas, who have not seen and yet believe.



Tuesday of the Fourth week in Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Is 55:1 All who are thirsty, come to the waters, says the Lord. Though you have no money, come and drink with joy.

Collect May the venerable exercises of holy devotion shape the hearts of your faithful, O Lord, to welcome worthily the Paschal Mystery and proclaim the praises of your salvation. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezechiel 47:1-9.12; Psalm 46:2-3, 5-6, 8-9; John 5:1-16

Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews. Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie- the blind, the lame, the paralysed. One who was there had been an

invalid for thirty eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knowing that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, Do you want to get well? Sir, the invalid replied, I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me. Then Jesus said to him, Get up! Pick up your mat and walk. At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked. The day on which this took place was a Sabbath, and so the Jews said to the man who had been healed, It is the Sabbath; the law forbids you to carry your mat. But he replied, The man who made me well said to me, 'Pick up your mat and walk.' So they asked him, Who is this fellow who told you to pick it up and walk? The man who was healed had no idea who it was, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd that was there. Later Jesus found him at the temple and said to him, See, you are well again. Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you. The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well.

So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jews persecuted him. (John 5:1-16)

Christ's mercy There are some references in the Gospel of St John to our Lord healing numerous sick people, but they are not nearly as numerous as in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). John's purpose is different. John tends to take particular scenes and dwell on them in more depth. In chapter 6:1-2 of his Gospel there is a reference to our Lord's general healing ministry. Our Lord went "across the sea of Galilee and there was a great multitude following him; they had seen the miracles he performed over the sick." In chapter 9: 6-7 our Lord heals a blind man with something of a ceremony, and the rest of the chapter is an unfolding of the meaning and results of this action. Our Gospel today is situated prior to these events, and is an isolated and private action of our Lord's, away from the gaze of the multitudes. The crowds and spectators are not in tow — our Lord is back again in Jerusalem for the feast, and we get the impression that he is mingling somewhat incognito among the crowds.

Presumably he has a few of his disciples with him — John provides us with a lot of detail, so we can assume he was with his Master. The scene is near the Sheep Gate pool. Incidentally, St John tells us that “there *is* in Jerusalem” this Sheep Gate pool — which is to say that he puts the event in the *present* tense as if it is *still* there. I wonder whether this indicates that at least this particular section of the Gospel was written before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, rather than near the end of the century which is commonly claimed for this Gospel. Be that as it may, there we find our Lord quietly moving among the people, perhaps on his way to or from the Temple. He is near the Pool, and the implication of St John’s text (5: 2-4) is that there were probably many sick persons there, but our Lord does not proceed to deliver them from their sicknesses. This is yet another indication that generally God expects us to *ask* him for his special favours and graces. But mysteriously there is one before whom our Lord does stop to speak. Why did he pause before this one? We do not know.

It is not as if this particular sick person was especially deserving. Our Lord knew that he had been there a long time — in fact, he had been there since before our Lord's very birth. I wonder if our Lord had seen him over those years when as a youth and young man he came up to Jerusalem for the feasts. In fact, St John is able to tell us exactly how long he had been there. Let us *notice our Lord's question to this long-standing invalid*. "*Do you want to be well again?*" It is as if there is doubt about it — it might indicate that the sick person was semi-content in his life-long inactivity. This would have a bearing on his spiritual state. Our Lord, concerned and compassionate as ever, may have been challenging him to do something better with his life. In his mercy he may have been calling him to something greater and richer. "*Do you want — really want — to be well again?*" The invalid appears to offer an excuse — that someone always beats me to it when the water is stirred. Our Lord immediately proceeds to cure him, giving him a new chance in life. But we also notice later in the chapter that our Lord, now in the Temple

and seemingly incognito again, says to the restored man, *“You are healed. Do not sin any more, or something worse might befall you.”* It does not look as if our man was especially admirable, for our Lord is warning him not to sin any more. But then we notice that the man *“went and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him”* — and he must have known that the “Jews” (the Temple aristocracy) were enemies of our Lord, and out to do him harm. We cannot tell, but it does not look as if this once-crippled man, now in full and active health, became all that our Lord hoped for him. *“Do you want to be well again?”* had been the question. This had an immediate reference to physical health, but my surmise is that also in our Lord’s mind was spiritual health. For his own reasons, and as a gratuitous act of divine mercy, our Lord chose to bestow a signal benefit on one who was but one of the crowd of sick persons. The man’s response, such as it seems to have been, is a lesson to us, for we too are recipients of divine mercy. Whatever God does for us constitutes a call to be generous in return.

Let us lovingly contemplate the divine mercy. Jesus stops and powerfully assists an unknown, unnoticed individual. We, most of us, are ordinary fish in the stream. But God has us constantly before his gaze. He sees our sins and limited spiritual state. Nevertheless he looks upon us kindly. He has done so much for us, and will continue to do so. He asks us to look on what he has done for us — and, with a grateful heart, to resolve not to sin. Let us identify with that cripple, restored to health, but in contrast, let us give ourselves over to following the Lord.



Wednesday of the Fourth week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Ps 69 (68):14 I pray to you, O Lord, for a time of your favour. In your great mercy, answer me, O God, with your salvation that never fails.

Collect O God, who reward the merits of the just and offer pardon to sinners who do penance, have mercy, we pray, on those who call upon you, that the admission of our guilt may serve to obtain your pardon for our sins. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 49:8-15; Psalm 144; John 5:17-30

Jesus said to them, “My Father is always working and I, too, am working.” For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; for not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal to God. Jesus gave them this answer: “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by

himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, to your amazement he will show him even greater things than these. For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father, who sent him. I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man. Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out-

those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned. By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just for I seek not my own will but the will of the one who sent me.” (John 5:17-30)

Reliable witness There are two obvious things about Jesus Christ that are intimately linked with one another, and which when linked, have very important implications. The first thing is that Jesus Christ is universally admired for his moral stature, and the second thing is that he made unparalleled claims as to his own Person. Of course, the Christian accepts Jesus Christ as the moral exemplar for mankind without peer. The greatest Christian saints have regarded themselves as nothing before him, and have sought with all their hearts to benefit from a share in his spirit — which is the Spirit of God. But the world at large also accepts, to say the least, the high holiness of Jesus of Nazareth. Islam counts him to be a great prophet — not as great as Mahomet, but great nevertheless. They would view it as absurd to deem him

less than this. The Buddhist speaks reverently of Christ — I recall that on one occasion the Dalai Lama spoke of Jesus as an instance of the Buddha in history. This was high praise for him, from the perspective of the Dalai Lama. He would never dream of denigrating Christ's moral stature. Hinduism looks upon Christ with respect — many Hindus admire Jesus as a great teacher, saint and even a god, that is, as one of the many gods. Gandhi admired Jesus Christ while criticizing Christians for not living his moral teaching. Gandhi seems to have been of the opinion that the Church distorted Christianity when it became the religion of the Emperor and the Empire. Of course, he did not allow that Jesus Christ was the only-begotten Son of God, nor that Christ is the only name by which men can be saved, and the only way to the Father. But he fully accepted Christ's high virtue and the excellence of his moral teaching. There is even what is called Christian atheism — an ideology in which the God of Christianity is rejected but the moral teachings of Jesus are followed. Such persons think of Jesus as a wise and good man, and

accept his moral teachings while rejecting the idea of his divinity. Christian atheists look to Jesus as an example of what a Christian should be, but of course they do not see him as God. All these variants allow for his moral greatness.

Much could be said about all this, but there is a simple question to be asked. If Jesus Christ was a great Saint in mankind's history, what is to be made of his extraordinary claims, if they are deemed to be untrue? That they are extraordinary is as plain as the day, and our Gospel passage today illustrates this. He refused to conform to the Pharisaical notions of the Sabbath rest, saying that "*My Father is always working, and so do I.*" The implication was clear to the leaders of the Jews: Christ was calling God his own natural father. He therefore shared the life and nature of God himself. He was divine. Our Lord goes on to declare that whatever the Father does, the Son — himself, that is — does too. The Father shows him, the Son, all that he does. Just as the Father gives life to the dead, so the Son gives life to whomsoever he pleases. God

is man's judge, but all judgment has been entrusted to him, the Son. The Scriptures taught that life comes to the one who hears the word of God and obeys it. Christ claims here that "*whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life*" (John 5:17-30). He, Jesus, has life in himself and he has full authority to judge mankind. All these are *divine* claims, and the Jewish authorities had the perception to be very alive to them. The Gospel of St John is replete with them. Gandhi did not accept them, nor does Islam, nor does Hinduism, nor does the modern Western secularist, let alone the atheist. So, was Jesus Christ deluded, a little mad, or was he a deceiver? Those leaders of the Jews who implacably opposed our Lord (and not all the leaders did — Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were disciples) considered him a *deceiver*. They certainly did not think him deluded or mad — his intellectual apparatus was so superior to anything on their side that they finally were reduced to silence before him. We read that a point was

reached when they did not ask him any more questions. Our Lord was left the winner of all debates. It does not look as if any case could possibly be made for Christ being deluded or mad. Of course, one could assert that the Church and the New Testament completely distorted the historical Jesus. But this is a gratuitous claim, without any evidence. If then his exalted claims are untrue, he was a deceiver. If it were the case, his moral status is in ruins — and this is something nobody thinks.

What I am saying is that the sanctity of our Lord's character is itself a very important ground for assent to his claims. His claims are unique and exclusive. *Can anyone of you convict me of sin?* he asked his enemies. *He who sees me sees the Father*, he told his disciples. *No one comes to the Father but through me. I am the Light of the world* — apart from me, you are in the darkness. Why should we believe such extraordinary assertions? We should believe them mainly because the one who uttered them is so perfect a man in all that truly distinguishes manhood, and hence so credible. The one who comes to

know Jesus Christ sees that it is incredible that he would deceive, and absurd to claim that he was demented. The all-holy Christ is absolutely worthy of the world's belief.



Thursday of the Fourth week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 105 (104):3-4 Let the hearts that seek the Lord rejoice; turn to the Lord and his strength; constantly seek his face.

Collect We invoke your mercy in humble prayer, O Lord, that you may cause us, your servants, corrected by penance and schooled by good works, to persevere sincerely in your commands and come safely to the paschal festivities. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Exodus 32:7-14; Psalm 105;

John 5:31-47

Jesus said, If I testify about myself, my testimony is not valid. There is another who testifies in my favour, and I know that his testimony about me is valid. You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth. Not that I accept human testimony; but I mention it that you may be saved.

John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light. I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life. I do not accept praise from men, but I know you. I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; but if someone else comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God? But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about

me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say? (John 5:31-47)

Belief Let us notice two obvious parts of what our Lord says in today's Gospel passage. Firstly, he speaks of the testimonies which give credibility to him and his message. Our passage today is part of a long discourse in chapter 5 of John, which follows the reference to the "Jews" beginning to persecute Jesus for his healing on the Sabbath day (John 5:16). With respect to this particular passage we may suppose the same challenge addressed to our Lord on other occasions: show us evidence of your authority to do and say these things. When our Lord cleansed the Temple of commercial activity, the "Jews" said to him, "*What sign can you show us*" to support what you are doing (John 2:18)? In Matthew 21: 23, our Lord is asked, "*By what authority do you do these things?*" The same recurs in Mark 11: 28: "*By what authority do you do these things? Who gave you this authority?*" In our passage today, our Lord points in general terms to what ought be sufficient evidence of his authority to anyone of good will.

To begin with, there was the testimony of Israel's most recent prophet. All the people counted John as a prophet, and John is shown by each of the Gospels as having formally declared for Jesus. Our Lord's appeal to John's testimony before his critics shows that the "Jews" — the Temple aristocracy, perhaps — were also well aware that John had thrown his prophetic weight behind the Person and mission of Jesus. He had made it clear that Jesus was the Messiah. The second testimony was our Lord's very words: *"I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me."* So if John had not appeared on the scene, still, what Christ had been doing ought to have been ample testimony of his heavenly authority. But then there was the testimony of the Father himself. *"The Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me."* Finally, there was the testimony of the Scriptures: *"You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you*

refuse to come to me to have life.” The appeal to John the Baptist, the appeal to his own works, and the appeal to the testimony both of the Father and of Sacred Scripture, were all elements of an apologetic which had their origin in our Lord’s own defence of himself.

But there is a second part to our passage today. Having given what may be termed the “evidence” of his authority, our Lord turned to what was of greater moment. Despite the testimonies thus cited, they did not believe. Let us look carefully at this, because it indicates that they did not believe, not because of a lack of evidence, but because of their moral and religious condition. *“These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.”* They lacked love for God, and this resulted in their not coming to Jesus: *“I know you. I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts.”* Further, they were incapable of believing in Jesus because they sought the praise of men and not of God: *“How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only*

God?” So the lack of true religion in them rendered them unable to believe. It also involved a lack of belief in the religion they actually professed — that of Moses. They did not believe Moses: *“Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me.”* They believed neither Moses nor what he wrote, for he wrote about the Christ who was to come. *“But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?”* (John 5:31-47). So in respect to those among the Jews who refused our Lord the credence that was his due, their fault was a fundamental one. They lacked religious faith. They did not accept John as a prophet, nor did they even believe Moses — though they doubtlessly thought they did. Fundamentally they did not know God, nor did his word dwell in them, for *“the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent.”* This lack of religion and belief resulted in their

refusal to come to Jesus, as a matter of moral choice and religious belief.

Our Lord is saying that the foundation of faith in him is a moral and religious spirit. Without these personal moral qualities, all the evidence in the world will avail but little. Our Lord is putting his finger on the root issues within our hearts, matters that may be out of man's own sight. Man may not see where he is coming from, a flawed moral foundation. Let us pray to God, asking that he give us the right starting points for all our thoughts and desires. We need to be coming from the right moral basis, and all the while we must preserve it if we are to arrive at the saving truth of Jesus Christ, and remain in him thereafter.



Friday of the Fourth week in Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 54 (53):3-4 O God, save me by your name; by your power, defend my cause. O God, hear my prayer; give ear to the words of my mouth.

Collect O God, who have prepared fitting helps for us in our weakness, grant, we pray, that we may receive their healing effects with joy and reflect them in a holy way of life. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Wisdom 2:1.12-22; Psalm 33;

John 7:1-2.10.25-30

Jesus moved around in Galilee; he did not wish to travel in Judea, because the Jews were trying to kill him. The Jewish feast of Tabernacles was near. When his brothers had gone up to the feast, he himself also went up, not openly but as it were in secret. Some of the inhabitants of Jerusalem said, "Is he not the one they are trying to

kill? And look, he is speaking openly and they say nothing to him. Could the authorities have realized that he is the Christ? But we know where he is from. When the Christ comes, no one will know where he is from.” So Jesus cried out in the temple area as he was teaching and said, “You know me and also know where I am from. Yet I did not come on my own, but the one who sent me, whom you do not know, is true. I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me.” So they tried to arrest him, but no one laid a hand upon him, because his hour had not yet come. (John 7:1-2, 10, 25-30)

Christ the Lord We notice in our Gospel passage today that in respect to our Lord’s freedom of movement, John the Evangelist distinguishes between Galilee and Judea. While Jesus moved around in Galilee, he “*did not wish to travel in Judea, because the Jews were trying to kill him.*” Our Lord’s homeland was Galilee, which, though within the pale of the chosen people, was much more cosmopolitan than Judea. It was more difficult of reach for the religious authorities in Jerusalem, and hence our Lord

was safer in his ministry there. When he went up to Jerusalem, the conflict intensified. On this occasion, the feast of Tabernacles, our Lord went up “*in secret*” — his relatives had gone before him, thinking he was staying behind. Within the melée of the feast, the “Jews” were on the look-out for him as they expected him to be there. John tells us that they had determined to put him to death, and the people of Jerusalem were aware of this: “*Some of the inhabitants of Jerusalem said, ‘Is he not the one they are trying to kill?’*” Now, who were the “Jews” of St John’s Gospel? They were certainly not the average Jewish citizenry, nor the ordinary inhabitant of the City. The “Jews” were principally the leading Temple authorities, an influential hard core of the Sanhedrin that took all before them, the highest echelons of the Jerusalem priesthood, and their associates. We could say they were the Temple aristocracy together with those who were especially associated with them. They were not all of the Sanhedrin, nor all of the Pharisees, though. We do not know the extent of the implacable opposition to our Lord in these

circles, but at least one of the Pharisees (Nicodemus) — a “ruler of the Jews” — was a disciple. Another member of the Sanhedrin who was a disciple and who disagreed with the prevailing hatred was Joseph of Arimathea. Further, John tells us that “*among the rulers many believed in him*” (12: 42). It seems, then, that our Lord had won the minds of many of the religious ruling class in the City. They were not, though, the dominant clique, and “*because of the Pharisees (they) did not confess him for fear of being put out of the Synagogue*” (John 12: 42). This was the situation, and humanly speaking, the net was closing.

But the real situation was that Christ was entirely in control of his own destiny. He had shown time and again that nothing and no-one could dominate him. In any confrontation he invariably came out the winner. In debate on the meaning Scripture, in debate on the Law of Moses, in the understanding of the Sabbath observance — whatever it might be, he proved himself Master in every circumstance. Apart from confrontations, his power over nature and the underworld was irresistible. On one

occasion his very life was threatened by his own townsmen — but he passed through their midst and went on his way. Just what this meant in detail, we are not told. But it certainly does mean that no circumstance was superior to Jesus Christ. In moments of showdown with the highest authorities in Jerusalem he plainly stated his divine sonship, and they took up stones to stone him — but he effortlessly escaped from them. In storms at sea, he was superior to the situation. No demon, or combination of demons, could resist his power. He could not be tricked into a course which was not according to the divine plan. At the beginning of his ministry, the Prince of demons tried his best and was sent off, learning that nothing could divert this Man. In respect to situations of sudden embarrassment — such as the presence of great crowds, now hungry and lacking any food — he was in no way unequal. He fed them all at a word and with a blessing. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he told Simon Peter that at a word he would be given twelve legions of angels to defend him. That is to say, there was nothing on earth which could overwhelm

Jesus Christ unless he consented to it. There was no-one like him in the history of the world, and had it been his intent and had he chosen to use his manifest power, he could clearly have been the Lord of the world in a temporal sense — and Satan guessed this. But the divine plan for the salvation of the world was radically different. The Father willed that our Lord freely submit to the sinful persecution which was being mounted against him. His triumph would be effected by obedience amid suffering and death. All of this is indicated in our Gospel today, when John writes that “*they tried to arrest him, but no one laid a hand upon him, because his hour had not yet come*” (John 7:1-2, 10, 25-30).

The most important thing in life, the rocklike basis of all our security, is the divine will. What God wants is the very best for us. Jesus Christ is our exemplar. Let us then resolve to follow in his footsteps, no matter what might be the cost. That is our truest security. Therein lies our life.



Saturday of the Fourth week in Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 18 (17):5, 7 The waves of death rose about me; the pains of the netherworld surrounded me. In my anguish I called to the Lord, and from his holy temple he heard my voice.

Collect May the working of your mercy, O Lord, we pray, direct our hearts aright, for without your grace we cannot find favor in your sight. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 11:18-20; Psalm 7:2-3, 9bc-12;
John 7:40-53

On hearing his words, some of the people said, Surely this man is the Prophet. Others said, He is the Christ. Still others asked, How can the Christ come from Galilee? Does not the Scripture say that the Christ will come from David's family and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived? Thus the people were divided because of Jesus.

Some wanted to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him. Finally the temple guards went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, Why didn't you bring him in? No one ever spoke the way this man does, the guards declared. You mean he has deceived you also? the Pharisees retorted. Has any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him? No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law- there is a curse on them. Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he is doing? They replied, Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee. Then each went to his own home. (John 7:40-53)

No-one speaks as He The scene is in the holy City, Jerusalem. Christ is in the Temple, teaching. We read that our Lord “*cried out*” in the Temple, “*teaching and saying, ...*” (John 7: 28). John’s use of these three verbs one after the other — he cried out, teaching, saying — is an emphatic way of describing the drama of our

Lord's gripping announcement. You do not know the One whom I know, our Lord continued. *"I know Him, because I am from Him and He sent me."* We read that many of the crowd believed in him because of his words and his miracles. The Pharisees heard that the crowd were saying such things, so they and the chief priests sent officers to arrest our Lord. Then the scene shifts again back to our Lord and his powerful words, announcing his coming departure from them. We read that *"on the last day, the great day of the feast, our Lord stood there and cried out, saying..."* Once again, St John is emphasising the solemn and dramatic character of our Lord's address — he *"cried out, saying..."* No other prophet assumed so much authority as in the words that follow. *"If any man thirsts, let him come to me and drink. The one who believes in me shall have living water flow from within him"* (John 7:37-38). John explains that our Lord was speaking of the Holy Spirit, which those who believe in him would receive once he was glorified. The people were divided, but *"Many of the people, when they heard these words, said, truly, this*

man is the Prophet.” They heard and saw him, and they believed. He had to be the Prophet predicted by Moses (Deuteronomy 18:18), who was held to be Judaism’s greatest prophet (Deuteronomy 34: 10). Others said he was the Messiah, in response to observing him and listening to him. Others, thought, raised the objections that he did not seem to have fulfilled the prophecies, for the Messiah would come from Bethlehem and not from Galilee. So there was a division of opinion, and in all of this the Temple guard was in the crowd, likewise listening to Jesus and observing him. They had been sent to arrest him, but *“no man laid hands on him.”* So they returned to their superiors, and without their man.

The reason why they could not bring their prisoner was that *“never had any man spoken as he has.”* They had seen him, heard him, come to know him somewhat, and found him to be utterly convincing. They could not bring themselves to arrest him. It is yet another indicator of the fact that the best evidence of Christ’s truth and authority came from the direct knowledge of him with an open and

good heart. The Pharisees called him a “*deceiver*” — are you also *deceived*? they said to the guard. Look around you — “*have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him?*” In fact, some had, but for fear of the leaders, they were not bearing witness to their belief. Nicodemus spoke up — should we not give him a hearing? This very question, together with the testimony of the Temple guard, illustrates the critical importance of approaching Jesus, listening to him, contemplating his Person, and allowing one’s heart to be filled with his reality. Christian belief will not primarily be the result of mastering the evidences for Jesus Christ. It will come from getting to know him personally. This is what the chief priests and many of the Pharisees refused to do. Let us then take our cue from the testimony of very many of the crowd who heard our Lord, from the Temple guard, and from Nicodemus — whom we can take as representing those among the ruling class who were all-too silent believers. We must spend time listening to Jesus and being with him. We must contemplate his Person, and allow the love for him to take possession of

our hearts. We must place ourselves in the Temple, as it were, gazing at Jesus as he makes his electrifying announcement. Come to me! he says. If you are thirsty, come and drink from me. I shall provide for your life's thirst. If you believe in me, the Scriptures will be fulfilled — out of you will flow rivers of living water. The Holy Spirit will guide and sustain you along your way. This nourishment will never fail, and it will assuredly take you to where you should go. I am the only One who can provide this for you, and it is unlocked for you by your faith. So come! Come to me and believe. Place your total faith in me, for I am all you have been made for.

Christianity is not just a doctrine about God and about right human living. It is not just a way of life. It is the knowledge and love of a Person, and that Person is Jesus Christ. By listening to him and loving him we fulfil the purpose of our having been created. Before the world began, St Paul writes, God chose us, chose us in Christ to be holy and full of love in his sight. All this is fulfilled by

our knowledge and love of Jesus Christ, and by our persevering desire to follow in his footsteps.

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Second reflection: (John 7:40-53)

No one has ever spoken as has Christ St Paul writes that in Christ we have received every heavenly blessing. He is our greatest possession, God's greatest gift. St Paul writes elsewhere that God's plan for us is "*Christ in you, your hope of glory.*" In him lies all our hope. Now, a startling feature of this wondrous fact of Christ is that Christ was not accepted by all. Indeed many did not accept him. We read that "*the people could not agree about him*" (John 7:40-53). It appears that the majority of the Pharisees did not accept him. And so it has been down through the ages since then — the Person of Christ was, has been, and remains controverted. Nevertheless, the words uttered by the police sent to arrest him were full of

meaning for all history. They were profoundly moved by the words of our Lord: “*There has never been anyone who has spoken like him.*” How truly they spoke! Neither Aristotle, Plato, Buddha, Mahomet, no-one in history has spoken like Jesus. Once when I was leading a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, I used a Jewish guide for some parts of Jerusalem. I remember a passing remark he made about Jesus of Nazareth. He said that he had had an incredible influence on the world. So true! No-one has spoken as he has spoken. He speaks now in and through the voice of the Church to each one of us. We remember the words of the Father speaking from the bright cloud which covered the three apostles who would be the “pillars” of the infant Church: “*This is my beloved Son. Listen to him.*”

“*Listen to him!*” Let us listen to him constantly, and obey.



Fifth Sunday of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 43 (42):1-2 Give me justice, O God, and plead my cause against a nation that is faithless. From the deceitful and cunning rescue me, for you, O God, are my strength.

Collect By your help, we beseech you, Lord our God, may we walk eagerly in that same charity with which, out of love for the world, your Son handed himself over to death. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezechiel 37:12-14; Psalm 129;
Romans 8:8-11; John 11:1-45

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair. So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the

one you love is sick.” When he heard this, Jesus said, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. Yet when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days. Then he said to his disciples, “Let us go back to Judea.” “But Rabbi,” they said, “a short while ago the Jews tried to stone you, and yet you are going back there?” Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world’s light. It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light.” After he had said this, he went on to tell them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.” His disciples replied, “Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.” Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. So then he told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.” Then Thomas (called Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples,

“Let us also go, that we may die with him.” On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. “Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.” Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” “Yes, Lord,” she told him, “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.” And after she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. “The Teacher is here,” she said, “and is asking for you.” When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet

entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there. When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?" Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. "Take away the stone," he said. "But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days." Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took

away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him. (John 11:1-45)

The sign of glory In his Gospel, St John refers to Christ's miracles as "signs." The first of these "signs" (that is, in John's account) was the changing of water into wine at the wedding feast of Cana, and we read that by this manifestation of his glory our Lord's disciples believed in him (John 2: 11). Other signs of his glory followed (John 2: 23). Our Lord cured the sick (4:50), the lame (5:8), the blind (9:7). He fed huge crowds with but a handful of food (6:11). These were signs of his divine power and the

mercy he had come to bestow on sinful man. The event narrated in today's Gospel, our Lord's raising of his friend Lazarus from the dead, was yet another of his "signs," and it showed that he could liberate us from our greatest enemy, death, and the power of sin which is its fundamental cause. Of what, then, is the raising of Lazarus from the dead a sign? First of all, of course, it shows forth Christ's divine power. Consider any secular figure of influence and power in history, and ask, could that person ever have raised anyone from the dead? Take the greatest of military or political figures, say, Alexander the Great or Julius Caesar — they killed, massacred and destroyed numbers of people in extending their power — but no-one would imagine that they could ever raise anyone from the dead. Such an idea would be preposterous. In fact, they themselves were helpless without their armies. Take any great religious figure of history outside of the Judeo-Christian religion — say, Buddha or Mahomet or Confucius. Take any great intellectual figure, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, or any other such figure of human history

— none of them could match the power of Jesus Christ over nature or the netherworld. Christ could raise people from the dead at will. Once, with his disciples, he was approaching the town of Nain and out from the town the body of a young man was being carried for burial, the only son of his widowed mother. Full of compassion for the mother, our Lord stopped the procession and at a simple word raised the young man to life. The man sat up there and then, and our Lord gave him to his mother. On another occasion our Lord raised to life a little girl and gave her back to her parents. The raising of Lazarus from the dead was a sign of the glory of our Lord in that it displayed his divine power.

But the raising of Lazarus from the dead pointed to an even greater sign of Christ's power and glory, which was his own resurrection from the dead. In fact, it preceded his own resurrection only by a short time. *I freely lay down my life and I freely take it up again*, he said. The Incarnation itself — God becoming man — was a stupendous act of divine power. How could he who is Pure

Being and infinitely beyond all change, become a man and submit to death and drink that cup to its dregs? The Church has expressed the mystery of the Incarnation in terms of Person and Nature: the second divine Person, without foregoing his divine nature, took on a human nature, and was able to atone for the sins of the world through and in his human nature. Thus God was able to experience death — as Man. But the point here is that the Incarnation was a mighty act of divine power. It was a sign of his glory — St John writes in the Prologue that *the Word became flesh, and we saw his glory, the glory of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth* (1: 14). While Christ submitted to death for our sins, death had no independent power over him — he had full power over it. No other person has successfully predicted his own death and resurrection. No other person has stated that both his death and his resurrection were subject to his own power and ordinance, and proved this to be so by the event. He chose to die for our sakes, and he chose to rise again for our sakes. He submitted to death, and then conquered it. It

was a great sign of his glory. It manifested his victory over the power of sin, which was the heritage of the first man and woman. But following this, the rising of Christ from the dead is also a sign of the rising from spiritual death that occurs with each of us at our baptism. At our baptism we die with Christ, as it were. The power of sin which leaves us spiritually conquered and maintains us in a spiritual death is itself broken and conquered. Sin, which we, of ourselves, are unable to overcome, is put to death with the death of Christ, and that dying is applied to each of us at our baptism. Just as Lazarus came forth from the tomb at the word of Christ, so too we come forth from the spiritual tomb of original sin to share in the risen life of Christ, who rose to give it to us.

The raising of Lazarus is a pointer to Christ's resurrection, which is the great pointer and foundation of our own spiritual resurrection to a new life, the life of God and of holiness. It is this life we are called to live day by day, growing in it daily and thus advancing on our way to spiritual perfection, which is full union of friendship with

Jesus. Let us entrust ourselves to Jesus, asking him to help us live daily the new life of holiness.



Monday of the Fifth week of Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 56 (55):2 Have mercy on me, O God, for people assail me; they fight me all day long and oppress me.

Collect O God, by whose wondrous grace we are enriched with every blessing, grant us so to pass from former ways to newness of life, that we may be made ready for the glory of the heavenly Kingdom. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Daniel 13:1-9.15-17.19-30.33-62;

Psalm 22; John 8:1-11

Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered round him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, Teacher, this woman was caught in the

act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say? They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her. Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? No one, sir, she said. Then neither do I condemn you, Jesus declared. Go now and leave your life of sin. (John 8:1-11)

Christ's mercy A visitor to Judea and Galilee at the time of Jesus Christ would have seen that he, Jesus, was the principal man of religion, the greatest charismatic force, the unrivalled representative of God, in his day and place. No other man in the entire region held a candle to him in the field of religious faith. This was so obvious that

as far as the religious leadership in Jerusalem was concerned, his religious influence was in danger of overturning their own sway over the nation. Pilate could see that it was from envy that they had handed him over. An international traveller passing through the various regions of the Roman Empire and beyond would have, if calling on Palestine for an extended stay, been struck with the uniqueness of Jesus of Nazareth, when considered in the context of the world scene. It would have occurred to such a traveller that there was no-one in the world who could compare with him, though, of course, actual news of him was still of very limited extent. His miracles were astonishing, and one wonders just how far news of them spread. We read in the Gospels that people from beyond Judea and Galilee came to see, hear and be with him. When our Lord disappeared quietly into the region of Tyre and Sidon to be away from it all with his disciples, he could not pass unnoticed. The Syro-Phoenician woman quickly discovered that the Son of David was there among them. He was known in the pagan areas of the Decapolis,

and Matthew tells us that the report of him spread through “*all of Syria*” (Matthew 4: 24). His greatest cause of fame was his sheer holiness. He was the man of God *par excellence*, God’s spokesman. Indeed, he claimed to be God’s own natural Son, sharing in the divine nature — a remarkable claim, but made by One who personally seemed entirely credible. He was the religious phenomenon of his era. With good reason we read in John that “certain Greeks” who were at the feast said to Philip that they wanted “to see Jesus” (John 12: 21). His career was short, and this was according to the divine plan. Its greatest moment, its very best work, its achievement beyond all else was his submission to death at the hands of some within the top religious echelon. Unbeknown to the onlooker, his death turned the tide of sin and brought salvation to man.

Now, one of the very interesting things about the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth was his popularity, as we might call it, with those whom the respectable religious sector regarded as the worst types. When our Lord was

passing through Samaria with the usual crowds in tow, a chief tax collector — whom many would have regarded as particularly despicable — ran ahead to get a better view of Jesus. He yearned to see him. There was no complicated feelings of resentment, anger, scorn or whatever, in his heart with respect to this particular prophet. All he had heard he loved, and wanted to see, hear and be near. He was not disappointed. At the moment of approach, Jesus stopped, looked up, saw Zacchaeus peering down eagerly at him from the branches above, and with a warm smile asked him to come on down because he was to dine in his house that day. Joy and a happy confusion flooded this sinner's soul. He bathed in the sunshine of the friendship of Jesus, and thereupon changed the course of his life. He was a sinner come home to God. On another occasion we read that "*all the publicans and sinners drew near to Jesus to hear him*" (Luke 15: 1). We notice that "all" of them did so. There was something about Jesus and the way he warmly welcomed them that drew them all. He was utterly sinless, while they were sinners all. Yet they felt at home

in his company — not free of their considerable guilt, of course, but somehow empowered and enlivened by his love. We can imagine our Lord smiling in warm welcome to each and all of them. The Pharisees and scribes murmured against him — he was welcoming and even dining with these “sinners.” On another occasion our Lord was, by invitation, dining in the house of a leading Pharisee, and a woman with a bad reputation boldly entered the house and stood before our Lord, weeping. She poured out her sorrow for her life, but the point here is that she, a sinner, was irresistibly drawn to Jesus Christ. In our Gospel today (John 8:1-11) the scribes and Pharisees throw before our Lord an adulteress. Moses said she was to be stoned — what does he say? *I do not condemn you*, he said to her. *Go — but sin no more.*

Perhaps the greatest thing that historical revelation has given to man about the one, eternal God is that he is *rich in mercy*. God is all-holy, and he is compassionate and merciful. He did all that he could to take away the sin of the world, and to endow man with a share in his own life.

What more could I have done for my vineyard that I have not done? the prophet Isaiah had proclaimed on God's behalf (Isaiah 5:4). Let us look on Jesus Christ for what he is, the definitive revelation of the divine mercy, and it is this mercy which we see at work in our Gospel today. Every day, let us acknowledge our sins and appeal to Jesus for mercy. *Jesus, I trust you!* Let that be our prayer all the days of our life.



Second reflection: (John 8:1-11)

The sense of sin leads to mercy The scribes and Pharisees brought before our Lord a sinner whom they said Moses would have stoned. Our Lord's response was to remind them of their own sins, and quietly, one by one, they left the scene. The most obvious implication of this is that if we do not have a lively sense of our own sinfulness, we will probably be somewhat like the scribes and

Pharisees who so readily condemned another in this Gospel scene, and in other circumstances. They wished to see the sinner condemned. Our Lord, the sinless one, was merciful, while telling the sinner to sin no more. He was not saying that sin did not deserve punishment, nor that unrepented and unforgiven sin would not finally be punished, but he was being merciful nevertheless. A new start was offered.

If our Lord the sinless One is merciful, we who are sinners ought be merciful, and not like the scribes and Pharisees in this scene. Let us then take to heart the words of our Lord and go our way, striving to sin no more. Let us avoid the merciless spirit of the Pharisees with regard to others, and in its place put on the mind of Christ.



Tuesday of the Fifth week in Lent

Entrance Antiphon Ps 27 (26):14 Wait for the Lord; be strong; be stout-hearted, and wait for the Lord!

Collect Grant us, we pray, O Lord, perseverance in obeying your will, that in our days the people dedicated to your service may grow in both merit and number. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Numbers 2:4-9; Psalm 101; John 8:21-30

Once more Jesus said to them, “I am going away, and you will look for me, and you will die in your sin. Where I go, you cannot come.” This made the Jews ask, “Will he kill himself? Is that why he says, ‘Where I go, you cannot come’?” But he continued, “You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am, you will indeed die in your sins.” “Who

are you?” they asked. “Just what I have been claiming all along,” Jesus replied. “I have much to say in judgment of you. But he who sent me is true, and what I have heard from him I tell the world.” They did not understand that he was telling them about his Father. So Jesus said, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the one I claim to be and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him.” Even as he spoke, many put their faith in him. (John 8:21-30)

The truth One of the great strengths of the modern era is its recognition of the importance of sincerity. Of course, this has long, perhaps always, been recognized by man. But inasmuch as religion has usually been part and parcel of culture, a *formal* adherence to religion has often been taken as sufficient. In the Jewish society of our Lord’s time, religion was accepted as essential, required, and indispensable for the individual and society. What we see our Lord stressing, though, is absolute *sincerity*. When

you pray, go into your secret room and pray to your Father in that secret place — which is to say, do it sincerely and for the right motive. When you fast, put oil on your head so that no-one will know you are fasting except your Father in heaven — which is to say, do it *sincerely*, and for *God*. When you give alms, do not have it trumpeted before you. Your left hand must not know what your right is doing — which is to say, do it in all sincerity, for God alone. Modern man recognizes *sincerity*, and will not tolerate a formal profession for insincere reasons. However, what has happened over the last few centuries is that formal profession has come to count as secondary and even as unimportant. All that matters, all that avails, all that will save a man is his *sincerity* — no matter what he thinks, believes, professes or says. You may or may not be a Christian, but provided you are sincere in your view, your sincerity and not your view is what will matter. You may think that there is a God, and that Christ himself is God, and that he is the Redeemer of the world, but this in itself is not the important thing. What counts is your sincerity of

belief, whatever your belief may or may not be. You may deny that there is a God and that Christ is God and Redeemer of man — but such opinions are ultimately beside the point. What matters is that you be truly sincere in what you believe. Now, of course, as with every issue, such a position could not gain credence were it not for the fact that there are elements of truth in it. A person must be sincere in his holding to the truth as he sees it. If he is insincere, though holding to what is true, he is morally flawed. If he is sincere, though holding to what is untrue, there is a sense in which he is truly on the way.

Notwithstanding this, the pre-eminence of personal sincerity over objective truth has resulted in the relativity of truth itself. That is to say, “truth” has gradually lost its objective character — both philosophically and, to a point, popularly. Truth has become relative to each sincere person. People think that the best that can be hoped for is that people be sincere. That is to say, an insistence on there being an objective truth to religion, and on each person getting to that objective truth, is beyond what can

be reasonably expected. But in fact, what we must do is give priority to the grasp of objective reality, and not simply to personal, subjective sincerity. The prior thing in importance is that there is a truth out there, and what we must do is *sincerely strive to attain it*, understanding well that unless we strive, we may not attain it at all. The objectivity of reality is a fundamental philosophical principle which is widely missed in an era that stresses subjective sincerity. Now, this is of great importance for religion, and in particular for revealed religion. In our Gospel passage today, our Lord makes some striking assertions about the importance of our accepting certain objective facts. He does not say that it is sufficient for you to be “subjectively sincere,” whatever you may think. You must actually believe certain things. Jesus said to them, “*I am going away, and you will look for me, and you will die in your sin.*” They were heading for death — death in sin. He explains further — “*You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am, you will indeed die in your*

sins” (John 8:21-30). So then, if they refused to believe that “I am,” which was the expression Yahweh God had used to reveal his very own name to Moses, they would die in their sins. Their salvation depends, then, on their holding to this belief. They must accept certain things about our Lord if they wished to be saved — they must believe that he is divine. This passage is from the Gospel of St John, and John tells us at the end of his Gospel the purpose of his writing it. *“These things have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name”* (John 20:31). There is an objective truth to be believed.

Just before he ascended to Heaven our Lord charged his disciples to go to the whole world and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all he had commanded (Matthew 28: 19-20). In both Mark 16: 16, and John 3:18, it is clear that the one who believes will be saved, and the one who refuses to believe will be condemned. It is critical for our salvation

that we believe to believe all that God has revealed, and therefore we must do all we can to know what it is that he has revealed, and conform our lives to that objective truth. This is the true meaning of sincerity. Christ did not send the Church forth simply to make all men sincere – whatever they might choose to believe. He sent his disciples to the whole world to proclaim the objective truth about himself, and to make all men disciples of this truth. Let us then strive to know the truth of God, live according to it, and spend our lives in bearing witness to it.

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Second reflection: (John 8:21-30)

Belief in Jesus Our Lord makes a very stark statement: *“I have told you already; you will die in your sins. Yes, if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.”* (John 8:21-30). Our Lord’s words are stark and very precise. They show how fundamental to our eternal

welfare is faith in Christ. The fact is that there are many who neglect their faith in Jesus. They do not care for it, and there are others who reject it. It is possible for anyone to die in his sins, be he Catholic or non-Catholic, Christian or non-Christian. In one of her visions, St Teresa of Avila was shown her place in hell, were she to fail to live the Christian life. Let those who knowingly refuse faith in Jesus be warned. Let us be alive to the possibility of dying in our sins, and place all our faith firmly in Jesus, resolving to live in accordance with it.



Wednesday of the Fifth week in Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 18 (17):48-49 My deliverer from angry nations, you set me above my assailants; you saved me from the violent man, O Lord.

Collect Enlighten, O God of compassion, the hearts of your children, sanctified by penance, and in your kindness grant those you stir to a sense of devotion a gracious hearing when they cry out to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Daniel 3:14-20.91-95; (Psalm) Daniel 3;
John 8:31-42

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. They answered him, We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free? Jesus replied, I tell you the truth,

everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it for ever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. I know you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are ready to kill me, because you have no room for my word. I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you do what you have heard from your father. Abraham is our father, they answered. If you were Abraham's children, said Jesus, then you would do the things Abraham did. As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. You are doing the things your own father does. We are not illegitimate children, they protested. The only Father we have is God himself. Jesus said to them, If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. (John 8:31-42)

Truth and freedom In our Gospel today our Lord refers to "the truth." Aristotle also speaks of truth. For instance, he says that *"to say of what is that it is, and*

of what is not that it is not, is true.” (Metaphysics 1011b). This gives a priority to nature over language, culture, or the effects of historical experience. It subordinates signs (linguistic or otherwise) to the natural, physical, and the finally given presence of what the signs stand for. In various biblical commentaries there has been discussion about the uses of “truth” in classical Greek, and a contrast between Greek and Hebraic concepts of truth has been drawn. Some argue that while certain New Testament writers keep to the Hebraic concept of truth, other writers, especially John, achieve a fusion of the two. Whatever about that discussion, some things are evident about “the truth” in St John’s inspired presentation of Jesus Christ. Firstly, “the truth” is absolutely central to our Lord’s mission. A Greek philosopher may or may not have chosen to devote his life to discovering and teaching “the truth,” but Jesus Christ came into the world precisely to bear witness to it. That is what he told the official representative of the Roman Empire. *“For this was I born and for this did I come into the world, to bear witness to*

the truth.” The “truth” was far more central to our Lord’s life — Semite though he was — than it was to any Greek philosopher. Furthermore, he indicates to Pilate that “truth” is the most important issue for all, and he, Jesus, is the one who offers it: *“Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice”* (John 18: 37). This is a statement of great significance for the Hellenic world, an outstanding feature of which was its purported search for, discovery of and insistence on rationality and truth. The Hellenic interest in the truth set civilization on a course that, at least in theory, prized the truth and sought it in its various forms. Notwithstanding this, Pilate’s reply to Christ’s reference to the truth reverberates through the ages: *“What is truth?”* We do not know the spirit with which he put this question — it may have been cynical, scoffing, perplexed, or sceptical. Pilate did not wait for a reply from the One who told him that he, Christ, and only he, could give the ultimate reply. Pilate symbolizes the ambiguity of man’s attitude to the question of the truth, right to our day when the objectivity of truth is commonly denied.

In our Gospel today our Lord makes it clear that man's vocation is to know the truth. In a secular age, the "truth" has a broad and diffuse meaning. Of course, it can mean the object and content of every possible discipline of knowledge. All too often it is deemed to be relative to each person. Christ makes it clear that the truth is supremely himself and his word. *"To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth"*. Therefore, knowledge of the truth is not restricted to the philosopher, and in any case the philosopher may never attain to the truth. Knowledge of the truth in its supreme sense is Christ's gift to his disciples. The disciple knows the truth in knowing Jesus Christ and accepting his teaching. At the Last Supper our Lord said to his disciples that he was the Way, the Truth and the Life. During the 1830s in England a small group of friends from Oxford University (Anglican clergymen) made a trip through Ireland, and on one occasion they fell in with a poor Irish boy. They started talking religion, and were much struck

by the knowledge of the catechism possessed by that Catholic boy. He could answer practically any question they asked. He had knowledge that was clear, accurate, and marked by a spirit of genuine belief. He believed what the Church taught as having been revealed by Jesus Christ. He knew the truth that God had revealed. This, our Lord taught, was man's supreme and special vocation, to know the truth that has come from God. But our Lord insists on a second feature of this that I am not sure is found much in, say, Greek philosophy. It is that "the truth" will make you free. The true slavery is that of sin, and to be liberated from it one must know the "truth." Our Lord tells his audience that "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." They answered him, "*We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?*" Jesus replied, "*I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin*" (John 8:31-42). Our Lord has come to set us free, and this will happen if we accept him who is the truth.

Let us understand clearly that what we need most of all is “the truth.” In this, the Greeks were onto something of great importance, and Hellenic thought has bestowed a great heritage on us all. But Jesus Christ is the answer to this yearning for the truth. He came to reveal the truth, and the one who accepts him and his teaching possesses the fulfilment of what is his fundamental desire. Further, this “truth” will make us free. It will give to us life, life in abundance, and will take us on to holiness and to unending happiness hereafter. Let us then take our stand by Jesus Christ. He is all that we need, all that we hope for, all that we were created for.

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Second reflection: (John 8:31-42)

True freedom There is much talk in the world of freedom. The war in Iraq during the first decade of the twenty-first century was explained as a war to stop

despotism and to spread freedom. It was said at the time that if freedom were to spread among the peoples, a long way would have been traversed towards the defeat of terrorism. Freedom is understood in this context as simply freedom of (political and economic) choice. But, of course, mere freedom of choice need not make a person free, because a person could freely choose what is harmful. A person who freely chooses to take dangerous drugs or to engage in immoral behaviour will *not* end up being free as a result of this. That person will become the *slave* of drugs and of his own decadent impulses. This slavery will often end in a painful death. This all of us know, simply by looking around us. Freedom will only come if we freely choose what is right, true, good and best. Our Lord, the Redeemer of man, has made the matter even more explicit. *“If you make my word your home you will indeed be my disciples, you will learn the truth and the truth will make you free”* (John 8: 31-32). The truth comes from Jesus our Lord, in his word as it comes to us in the voice of the Church.

Let us make this word of truth our home and thus become his disciples. This word will make us free. Let us bring this kind of freedom, not simply freedom of choice, to the world. The greatest kind of freedom comes from freely choosing to make Christ's word our home, which is to say, being his disciples.



Thursday of the Fifth week in Lent

Entrance Antiphon Heb 9:15 Christ is mediator of a New Covenant, so that by means of his death, those who are called may receive the promise of an eternal inheritance.

Collect Be near, O Lord, to those who plead before you, and look kindly on those who place their hope in your mercy, that, cleansed from the stain of their sins, they may persevere in holy living and be made full heirs of your promise. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Genesis 17:3-9; Psalm 105:4-9;

John 8:51-59

I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death. At this the Jews exclaimed, Now we know that you are demon possessed! Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet you say that if anyone keeps your word, he will never taste death. Are you greater than our father

Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are? Jesus replied, If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me. Though you do not know him, I know him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad. You are not yet fifty years old, the Jews said to him, and you have seen Abraham! I tell you the truth, Jesus answered, before Abraham was born, I am! At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds. (John 8:51-59)

I AM Our Gospel passage today reports what must be regarded as the most extraordinary thing ever said in the entire history of Israel. Let us go back a little — indeed, let us go back to a pivotal moment in the history of the chosen people of Israel. I refer to the first meeting of Moses with Yahweh God. One could say that from this event there flowed so much that would define the history,

the identity and the life of Israel. It was the meeting of Moses with God at the Burning Bush. It was at this meeting that Moses came to know the God of Israel personally. He received his mission to lead the people out of slavery to the Promised Land. It was the start of one of the most remarkable careers in human history. Moses saw the Bush burning, but not being consumed. He approached, and God spoke to him from the Bush, addressing him by name: Moses! Moses! I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. I will send you to lead my people out of Egypt. I will be with you. Moses asked for God's name — other gods had their names (Moloch, Baal, etc.), what of yours? At this, God announced the famous and unique name of the God of Judaeo-Christian Revelation: *I am who am*. So exalted was this name, so commanding of the reverence of the nation, that there came to be an immense reluctance even to pronounce it — with substitutes being sought and used in its place. Indeed, one of the Ten Commandments imposed the obligation of not taking the name of the Lord God in

vain. We moderns have much to learn from what became an institutional reverence for the name of God. We blithely talk of God as if he were but some higher being. Catholics used to cultivate the practice of bowing the head slightly at the name of Jesus. We need to consider what we shall do to preserve in our life reverence for the name of God. The point here, though, is that on a certain occasion in history the holy name of God was given to man: *I am who am* (Exodus 3:14). That name was itself a revelation of who God is. He is the One who, in terms of his essence, Is.

No matter how great the prophet, none would have dreamed of applying to himself God's sacred name. Abraham would never have done such a thing, nor Moses who was the great protagonist bringing this name to the people. None of the judges or kings would have applied to himself this name — it would have struck at the heart of the religion. From the greatest to the least, from Elijah to John the Baptist, or from Micah to the prophetess Anna in the Gospel of St Luke, no prophet would have dared

attribute to himself this most holy name, “I am.” It was the sacred name *par excellence*. No phrase was like it. But one person did, and did so calmly, with such utter assurance, and in the presence not of credulous friends and devotees, but of the highest echelons of the people. This special audience was hostile, envious, and searching for legal pretexts to destroy him. He began with something astonishing in itself: *“I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.”* The prophets had taught that if man keeps to *God’s* word, he will live. Here, *Jesus of Nazareth* says that if anyone keeps to *his* word, that person will never see death. This was unparalleled, and the people said as much: *“Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?”* At this, our Lord proceeds to assure them that he was indeed greater, much greater, than Abraham. God was his own Father — and Abraham had never referred to God as “My Father.” But there was more. *“Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.”* Indeed, our Lord continued,

“before Abraham was born, I am!” These are astonishing words, and I would be interested to know what, for example, a Jewish scholar who respects the moral character and intellectual quality of Jesus of Nazareth, would say about them. Our Lord is plainly identifying himself with Yahweh God who spoke to Moses in the Burning Bush, and who gave to Moses this name as being his very own. The leaders — the “Jews” in St John’s narrative — promptly picked up stones with which to execute him. Our passage today has to be considered as one of the most significant in the inspired writings.

Jesus of Nazareth is truly man. When the Jews sought stones to stone him for such an outrageous and blasphemous statement, Christ did not issue lightning bolts to repel his enemies and defend himself. He hid in the Temple till all was clear, and then slipped away. He was truly born into the human condition, and subjected himself to its limitations. He could have employed his divine power to protect himself — at a word, he once said, he could summon twelve legions of angels to defend him. But

no, he engaged with life and his redemptive mission as man. Yet he was God — God the Son. Let us marvel at this Man, our Redeemer, our Friend, and our God, and let us never stray from him!

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Second reflection: (Genesis 17:3-9; John 8:51-59)

The surprises of God The Church places before us in the Old Testament reading of today a fundamental text of the Old Testament, in which God establishes his Covenant with Abraham. He promises to give to him and to his descendants the promised land of Canaan, and guarantees his presence among them as their God. In the event, the chosen people were unfaithful, and a new covenant was promised, one far more wonderful than this, the first. In our Lord's words in John 8:51, this new covenant far surpasses the promises of the old. "*Whoever keeps my word,*" our Lord promises, "*will never see death.*"

He was speaking as Yahweh — “*before Abraham ever was, I am.*” God surprises mankind with the generosity of his plans. Whatever we might imagine of the joys God has in mind for us if we are faithful to him, what in fact will be granted to us will immeasurably surpass those imaginings.

So let us give all we have to gain the prize.



Friday of the Fifth week in Lent

Entrance Antiphon Heb 9:15 Christ is mediator of a New Covenant, so that by means of his death, those who are called may receive the promise of an eternal inheritance.

Collect Be near, O Lord, to those who plead before you, and look kindly on those who place their hope in your mercy, that, cleansed from the stain of their sins, they may persevere in holy living and be made full heirs of your promise. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 20:10-13; Psalm 17;

John 10:31-42

The Jews picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me? We are not stoning you for any of these, replied the Jews, but for blasphemy, because you, a man, claim to be God. Jesus

answered them, Is it not written in your Law, 'I have said you are gods'? If he called them 'gods', to whom the word of God came — and the Scripture cannot be broken — what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, 'I am God's Son'? Do not believe me unless I do what my Father does. But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father. Again they tried to seize him, but he escaped their grasp. Then Jesus went back across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptising in the early days. Here he stayed and many people came to him. They said, Though John never performed a miraculous sign, all that John said about this man was true. And in that place many believed in Jesus. (John 10:31-42)

Christ our God Some have argued that the principal influence on Mahomet's development of his religious doctrine was, apart from his own religious experiences, Judaism. There was also a clear influence

coming from Christian currents. This is manifest from the fact that the Koran firmly accepts that Jesus Christ is a great prophet, and his mother Mary the greatest of women. This could not have come from Judaism. Islam contends that all this was part of the revelation granted to Mahomet by the Angel Gabriel. The Christian world, of course, courteously but firmly disagrees, not only on the basis of the dictates of Christian doctrine, but also, it thinks, inasmuch as such a claim is unproven in a scholarly sense. Just as Old and New Testament scholarship has brought to light many and various influences on the sacred texts, so would similar critical scholarship on the Koranic text — if allowed — bring to light the various influences that formed it. Now, in respect to Mahomet's understanding of the Person of Jesus Christ, he was, of course, surrounded by the confused phenomenon of various heresies within the Christian world. Ever since the peace of Constantine some two hundred and fifty years before Mahomet's birth in Arabia, the East (that is, the region of Turkey, Asia Minor, and the regions bordering Arabia) had been rife with

Christian heresies of one kind or another. Mahomet as an outsider could scarcely have gained a clear idea of authentic Christian doctrine from such a tangled testimony (unless he took absolutely seriously the declarations of the Ecumenical Councils prior to his birth). But one thing would have been clear to him — Jesus Christ must have been a very important prophet, and Jesus' mother, whom the Christians all considered to be the all-holy virgin, must have been the greatest of women. But beyond this, all appeared confused. Arius, who lived and died long before Mahomet was born, had rejected the divinity of Jesus Christ. The Third Ecumenical Council held at Ephesus in 431 formally declared against Nestorius that Mary was the Mother of God — and this was to ensure the divinity of Christ. Then afterwards many of Nestorius' supporters relocated to Persia, and became an enduring regional influence. Christian doctrine on Christ would have appeared vague to one such as Mahomet.

I mention Mahomet and his teaching on Jesus merely as a contrast with the doctrine of the Gospel of St John on

Jesus Christ. Our awareness of such contrasts — and many could be drawn — helps us appreciate the wondrous proclamation of the divinity of Christ in both the New Testament and in the formal teaching of the Church, despite the numerous heresies which have frequented Christian history. With this contrast in mind, let us contemplate the Person of Jesus as John presents him in our Gospel today. The “Jews” — certain elements in the religious leadership — are in the process of gathering stones to put an end to Jesus there and then. He has uttered the most extraordinary of claims. *“Jesus said to them, I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me? We are not stoning you for any of these, replied the Jews, but for blasphemy, because you, a man, claim to be God”* (John 10: 31-42). That was the nub of the matter, and it always has been. When Christ asked his disciples on one occasion who men were saying he was, he received various answers — all agreed that he was a great prophet. But this was not enough — and it was exactly what numerous others over the course of history

would say, famously Mahomet himself. But it was an entirely inadequate answer. He was a prophet but far, far more — he was *God*. St John at the end of his Gospel tells us the purpose of its writing — it was so that the reader might believe that Jesus is the promised Messiah, and the Son of God. In the same chapter (20:28), John narrates as a high point the profession of Thomas the Apostle before the risen Jesus (and Islam even denies that Christ died on the cross, and therefore that he rose). Thomas's proclamation, which is that of St John's Gospel, is that Jesus is the Lord God: "*My Lord and my God!*" Thomas said to him, and this Christ accepted. "*You have believed because you see me — blessed are those who have not seen, yet believe.*" In our Gospel today our Lord appealed to his miracles — they show that God has sent him into the world, and that he is in the Father and the Father is in him. Those who heard our Lord and who were arguably the most educated in the nation, knew exactly what he was saying.

What makes Jesus Christ stand out above and beyond all others, no matter how holy or good, is that he is the Living God. He is not the Father, but he is the same God as is the Father. He is the Father's divine Son, and the two divine Persons are in so an ineffable a union of love for one another that their very love is a third divine Person, who is himself the same one God that the Father and the Son are. Let us bow down before the mystery of the Incarnate God, Jesus Christ our Brother, our Redeemer and our Lord. Let us live in him and for him, to the very end.

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Second reflection: (John 10:31-42)

The Son and the Father One of the characteristics of St John's Gospel is that we are given many of our Lord's statements describing his unique relationship with his heavenly Father. On one occasion when our Lord was being attacked for not observing the normal prohibitions laid down for the Sabbath, he said that inasmuch as his Father was working, so he worked too. He

was implying that he has as much right as God to do what he was doing, because he was God. The Gospel tells us that they understood our Lord to be claiming to be God's equal, and wanted to stone him. Here in our passage today, our Lord in very simple terms describes his closeness to his Father. He said that he is in the Father and the Father is in him. Two human lovers can get very close in friendship to one another, but our Lord says that he is *in* the Father, actually *in* the Father, and that the Father is *in* him — not merely close to him, but *in* him. But there is more elsewhere in the letters of St Paul. St Paul writes that the mystery of God's plan now revealed is Christ *in* you, your hope of glory. Christ *in* you. If the Father is in Christ, and Christ is in us, we have much to hope for.

Let us live day by day with a prayerful awareness of Christ in the Father, and Christ in us. Our Lord said elsewhere that if we keep his word, the Father will love us and they, the Father and the Son, will come and make their home with us — and they do this by the power of the Holy

Spirit. Thus does the Holy Trinity dwell within the one in the state of grace.



Saturday of the Fifth week in Lent

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 22 (21):20, 7 O Lord, do not stay afar off; my strength, make haste to help me! For I am a worm and no man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people.

Collect O God, who have made all those reborn in Christ a chosen race and a royal priesthood, grant us, we pray, the grace to will and to do what you command, that the people called to eternal life may be one in the faith of their hearts and the homage of their deeds. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever..

Scripture today: Ezechiel 37:21-28; (Psalm:) Jeremiah 31:10, 11-12abcd, 13; John 11: 45-56

Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him. But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees

called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. What are we accomplishing? they asked. Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation. Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, You know nothing at all! You do not realise that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish. He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one. So from that day on they plotted to take his life. Therefore Jesus no longer moved about publicly among the Jews. Instead he withdrew to a region near the desert, to a village called Ephraim, where he stayed with his disciples. When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, many went up from the country to Jerusalem for their ceremonial cleansing before the Passover. They kept looking for Jesus, and as

they stood in the temple area they asked one another, What do you think? Isn't he coming to the Feast at all? (John 11:45-56)

The useful The raising of Lazarus from the dead was a sensation, happening virtually at the doorway to the holy City. The word had for some time been out that Jesus was to be arrested. We read in the Gospel of St John that those openly supporting Jesus would be denied entry to the Synagogue. The parents of the man born blind, for instance, feared this decision of the Jewish authorities (John 9: 22). But the leaders could never find an opportunity to lay hands on our Lord, for the populace would not have tolerated it. Once they sent the Temple guard to arrest him as he was teaching in the Temple. The guard returned saying that they simply could not bring themselves to do it, he spoke so impressively. On another occasion the leaders had tried to stone him, but he escaped. Then suddenly Jerusalem was full of the news — Jesus of Nazareth was in the vicinity of the City and had spectacularly raised a dead man. At the call of Jesus, the

man had instantly walked from the tomb after being there in death for four days. Doubtlessly the very corruption of the body had begun, as the man's sister (Martha) had warned (John 11:39). Yet the power of Jesus' word was irresistible. It was a crisis of sorts, and the supreme council was convened. Some way had to be found to deal decisively with him, for his religious sway was great. Let us notice now how their hostile intent was, we might say, rationalized away into a seemingly upright resolve. The nation is in danger, some of them began to say. The Romans will hear there is a movement of sedition, that a popular leader is arising to take the reins, and that he has a great following behind him. Tolerant as Rome was of the religions of the peoples subject to them, including that of the difficult Jews, nevertheless they would brook no political sedition. *"If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation."* It was plainly a pretext, and when Pilate was importuned to execute Jesus, he himself saw that what was driving the religious leaders

was nothing other than envy. But the high priest took the ruse up and made it his own. He was blatantly *utilitarian*.

Broadly speaking, when a person makes what is *useful* the criterion of his deliberate action, he is being *utilitarian*. Generally, the utilitarian theory of moral choice states that if something is of use in promoting the happiness of oneself, or of others, or of the greatest number of people, it is morally legitimate to choose that thing. On the face of it, this notion has much to be said for it because who could doubt the moral value of the happiness of man? So, what serves the happiness of man is good — is it not? This is not the moment to critique the utilitarian theory of morality. Apart from anything, it is entirely dependent on what the subject happens to think constitutes happiness. Most importantly, however, theoretically it refuses to allow that some things are absolutely and essentially wrong, whatever be the circumstances and whatever be the goals in mind. Our Gospel narrative (John 11:45-56) is a case in point. We are speaking of the all-holy Jesus, whom the people counted as a great prophet, whose miraculous works and

high teaching were unparalleled in the memory of the nation at large. St John the Baptist spoke of One who was coming whose sandals he was not worthy to untie, and this Man he had identified as being Jesus. The leaders in Jerusalem were simply intent on his elimination. It was a bad, bad state of mind into which they had sunk, and they had done so with absolute resolution. This was the goal, and they were searching for pretexts *useful* to their purpose. The so-called “happiness” of the nation justified, in their own eyes, their plan for a terrible deed. They were rationalizing away the blood that would be on their hands, changing its colour from dark red to pure white. They were deadening their consciences, allaying the protests of the soul and leaving all within in a state of deadly silence. Thus they culpably convinced themselves that they were doing a good thing because it would (usefully) ensure the “happiness” of all. As the high priest said, *“You know nothing at all! You do not realise that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation*

perish.” In his moral darkness, little did he know how true, in a heavenly sense, his words were. He was prophesying.

Let us largely forget about doing what will ensure our “happiness,” and concern ourselves with doing what is *right*. Doing what is *right* will bring our happiness. Let us beware of looking to what is the most *useful* thing to do, and concern ourselves with doing what God wants. The friendship of Jesus Christ is our greatest happiness. It is what God has made us for, and there is one route to the friendship of Jesus Christ — it is doing what he has commanded. *If you love me, you will keep my commandments*, he said. Let us make the love of Christ and his divine will for us our top priority, and all else will fall into its due place.



PALM SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OF THE LORD

First Form: The Procession

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Mt. 21:9 Hosanna to the Son of David, the King of Israel. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest

Third Form: The Simple Entrance

Entrance Antiphon Cf. John 12:1, 12-13; Ps 24 (23): 9-10
Six days before the Passover, when the Lord came into the city of Jerusalem, the children ran to meet him; in their hands they carried palm branches and with a loud voice cried out: *Hosanna in the highest! Blessed are you, who have come in your abundant mercy! O gates, lift high your heads; grow higher, ancient doors. Let him enter, the king of glory! Who is this king of glory? He, the Lord of hosts, he is the king of glory. *Hosanna in the highest! Blessed are you, who have come in your abundant mercy!

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who as an example of humility for the human race to follow caused our Saviour to take flesh and submit to the Cross, graciously grant that we may heed his lesson of patient suffering and so merit a share in his Resurrection. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 50:4-7; Psalm 21; Philippians 2:6-11; Matthew 26:14-27:66

Entrance procession Gospel: *As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away. This took place to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet: Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.' The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They*

brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest! When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, Who is this? The crowds answered, This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee. (Matthew 21:1-11)

The greatest week On Palm Sunday the Church commemorates the entry of Jesus into the final and greatest week of his life, the week he was born for, the week during which he would fulfil his mission to save the world. Certain passages of the Scriptures foretold that the Messiah would come in acclaim — and on this day he entered the Holy City as the Messiah and King, acclaimed as such by his disciples and many of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Yet within a mere week it would be all over. He would be secretly arrested, tried, condemned, and ignominiously put

to a very public and shameful death. As he approached Jerusalem riding calmly, seriously, with eyes steadily on the City, he knew that this was to be his course. By this means he would take away the sin of the world and open the gates of heaven to fallen man. Here was the greatest man in all of history doing the greatest thing that has ever been done. He was launching God's kingdom, and doing so by submitting to his atoning death. That kingdom would entail making disciples of all the nations. Let Christ's entry to Jerusalem at the acclaim of disciples and followers raise the question in our minds of what it is to be a true disciple and follower. True discipleship turns on whether the disciple is ready to follow Christ not only as he makes his way into the City as the prophet had foretold, but whether he is ready to follow Christ through the rest of the week and above all back out of the City to the Place of the Skull, Golgotha. The prophets foretold not just the acclaim, but the Cross and the Resurrection as being necessary for entry into glory. Such was the light that Jesus threw on the true meaning of the Scriptures. They

foretold him as the Suffering Servant. He is their true interpretation. There were two groups of his disciples who followed him to the City. The first consisted of Mary his mother and some of the women, together with John. At the end of the week they stood near the cross as he suffered and died. The rest had fled, saving Simon Peter who followed from afar, having denied him when challenged. This is a snapshot of the situation age after age. There are two groups of followers, those who accept the cross and follow Jesus closely, and those who turn from it or who follow him from afar. In the event, those of his disciples who followed from afar became wonderful followers after his Resurrection. The choice for Jesus hinges around acceptance of the cross.

If it were to be asked, who are they who wish to be Christ's close friends? I am sure that we would all put up our hands — and this is certainly a good start. If we were not to have such an aspiration, it would be a sign of moral decay. But we must ask, what does being our Lord's close friend involve? It means, as our Lord points out elsewhere

in the Gospel, sitting down and calculating the cost. The cost is to accompany him along the road to Calvary, and to share with Mary her commitment of love beside her Son. On the hill of Calvary, a sword went through her very soul. In accepting this, she is the first and greatest disciple. It is with our eyes on Golgotha that we must answer the question about being Christ's special friend. It entails sharing his cross with him. With this as the prospect, how many of us still will put up our hands? It is this which takes a person to sanctity. Let us pray during Holy Week for the grace to do this. We must steep ourselves in the Passion of our Lord and learn to know our Lord and his teaching from that perspective. We must fall in love with our Lord along that route. Simon of Cyrene was converted while assisting our Lord to carry his cross. The Good Thief, as he is called, became a disciple of Jesus Christ and was saved by him while dying on his own cross nearby. Let us put time into meditating on our Lord on the Cross, in union with Mary. Holy Week, beginning with Palm Sunday, offers us the chance to begin to do this. Let us contemplate our

Lord's Passion this week and come to know our Lord more intimately. Being a true disciple and a member of the Kingdom means loving Jesus Christ and following him closely. It means accepting the cross that comes our way in the course of the life that God has marked out for us in his providence. The Cross will manifest itself to us in our daily responsibilities and work in life. It means being ready to accept and even choose small mortifications, especially those which the Church asks that we perform, such as the making of every Friday a day of penance. It means being faithful. The world regards suffering as something to be avoided at all costs, but our Lord made it the most fruitful of choices, if chosen in him. Christ has transformed it, provided it is endured for love of God and in fulfilment of his will.

Everything hinges on becoming a true disciple. We must be more faithful to Christ than those who shouted in acclaim as he entered the City. We must be among those who accompanied him to Golgotha — not as observers but as sharers in his mission of obedience and suffering for the

redemption of mankind. Mary is our model. Let us resolve to learn from the Passion and Death of Jesus Christ, and open our hearts to the grace of true discipleship. The true goal of life is not to be a cheer leader when things are going well for Jesus, but to be one who is resolved to share in his sufferings so as to share in his resurrection. We must become disciples of Christ Crucified. Let us ask for that grace this week.



Monday of Holy Week

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 35 (34):1-2; 140 (139):8
Contend, O Lord, with my contenders; fight those who fight me. Take up your buckler and shield; arise in my defence, Lord, my mighty help.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that, though in our weakness we fail, we may be revived through the Passion of your Only Begotten Son. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 42:1-7; Psalm 26; John 12:1-11

Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honour. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But one of his disciples,

Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages. He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. Leave her alone, Jesus replied. It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me. Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him. (John 12: 1-11)

Christ first The highest continental concentration of Catholics, and perhaps of Christians, is in South America. It is a continent of vast differences and widespread material poverty. It is therefore no surprise that in the 1960s there arose there a theological movement

inspired by the plight of the poor. It took its name from one of the movement's most famous books, written by the Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*. Liberation theology arose principally as a moral reaction to the poverty caused by social injustice in that region, and for some twenty years it had widespread influence, well beyond, in fact, the very continent. This influence began to diminish when the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1984 and 1986 issued a formal admonition. Cardinal Ratzinger, the head of this Congregation, writing on his own authority as a private theologian, also published radical critiques of it. The strength of Liberation Theology was that it took very seriously the plight of the poor and attempted to provide a thoroughgoing theology to support a Christian response to it. No Christian could possibly fault an earnest endeavour to alleviate human misery, for it is at the centre of Christ's revelation. However, this particular theology did have many theological limitations, and one (among others) was that the centrality of Christ, his redemption of us from

personal sin and the priority of love for him, were somewhat obscured. What mattered was the liberation of the poor from their oppression. This is not the moment to discuss Liberation Theology, but I refer to the lack of a proper focus on Christ in order to introduce a reflection on the events of our Gospel today. Our Lord had recently caused a sensation in the vicinity of Jerusalem. He had raised Lazarus from the grave after four days in death. It had been done in the presence of a crowd, at his loud command, and instantaneously. Just as he had raised the dead man at Nain at a mere word, and had done the same with the daughter of the Synagogue official, so he had ordered Lazarus to come forth from the tomb. Without a moment's delay, Lazarus, all bound in his cloths, had done so. That was the context, and a dinner is being held in our Lord's honour by Lazarus and his two sisters.

Suddenly and quietly, Mary the sister of Lazarus enters the dining room with her hands clutching a container of most expensive perfume — we are told it was pure nard, and a pound of it (John 12: 1-11). Spikenard (nard) is a

flowering plant that grows in the Himalayas of China, also found growing in the northern region of India and Nepal. The plant grows to about 1 metre in height and has pink, bell-shaped flowers. Its products can be crushed and distilled into an intensely aromatic amber coloured oil, which is very thick in consistency. Nard oil is used as a perfume, an incense, a sedative, and an herbal medicine. Nard was used to perfume the body of Patroklos by Achilles in Book 18 of Homer's *Iliad*. It also seems to have been offered on the incense altar at certain times in the eras of the First and Second Jerusalem Temples. The point here is that it was a famous perfume, and very expensive. The brother and two sisters had this in the house — who knows, it may have been purchased and used somewhat for Lazarus when he died several days before our scene. In any case, Mary takes the initiative of bringing it into the presence of Jesus, opening it, and pouring it out liberally on Jesus' feet. Perhaps she used all of it, and the house was filled with the aroma. There she was, pouring it on to the feet of Jesus, and wiping his feet

with her hair. It was a gesture of the most profound gratitude, praise, acknowledgement and veneration. In her sight, there was no-one like Jesus of Nazareth, their Friend and their Lord. We may say her act was a symbol of all those acts of religion involving thanks, praise and adoration. Religion, if it is to be true, will come to the aid of widows in distress as St James writes, but this is not the sum total of religion. I referred to Liberation Theology — and at the time of its heyday it gave the impression to many that the principal activity of religion was the liberation of the poor from their oppression. But no. The principal activity of religion is the humble acknowledgment of *God*. Of course, this will mean doing God's will, which includes very much the service of neighbour. But God and Christ are at the centre of religion, and Mary's act is emblematic of this.

Judas Iscariot, chosen by Christ to be one of his special companions, is entirely out of sympathy with such a gesture, and this is because by now he is entirely out of sympathy with Jesus Christ himself. What should have

been done, he says, is to have sold the perfume thus wasted, and to have used the proceeds to alleviate the *poor* from their plight. How like so many other responses down through the centuries to our own day! Let us place the Person of Jesus Christ at the forefront of our religion. He is the true object of our heart. Let us not miss the wood for the trees. The first thing is to love God with all our heart. The second is like it — to love our neighbour as ourself.

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Second reflection: (John 12:1-11)

Our life is a gift to Jesus Jesus and his disciples are dining in the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary. John tells us elsewhere that they were close friends of Jesus — and this itself is revealing. None of these three were called to the ordained ministry as were the Twelve, who were to be his companions and to share in his ministry. Nevertheless they were Jesus' close friends. All members

of the Church, all of Christ's faithful, are called to holiness, a holiness that consists in authentic friendship with the Lord. Here in our scene we have a beautiful expression of this friendship and veneration for Jesus. Not only do they entertain Jesus with the dinner, Lazarus being at table with Jesus, Martha serving. Mary brings in a pound of very costly ointment, pure nard, and anoints the feet of Jesus, wiping them with her hair. It is an expression of friendship and profound feeling for Jesus. In this ointment, they were pouring out their hearts and their lives.

Let us make our lives like that nard, an offering poured out as a gift for Jesus, a scent that will be pleasing to God. Let us make all our prayers, the prayer that ought pervade our lives, together with our work and service of God and neighbour, like that costly ointment: a gift to Jesus.



Tuesday of Holy Week

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 27 (26):12 Do not leave me to the will of my foes, O Lord, for false witnesses rise up against me and they breathe out violence.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, grant us so to celebrate the mysteries of the Lord's Passion that we may merit to receive your pardon. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 49:1-6; Psalm 70;

John 13:21-33.36-38

After he had said this, Jesus was troubled in spirit and testified, I tell you the truth, one of you is going to betray me. His disciples stared at one another, at a loss to know which of them he meant. One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him. Simon Peter motioned to this disciple and said, Ask him which one he means. Leaning back against Jesus, he asked him, Lord,

who is it? Jesus answered, It is the one to whom I will give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish. Then, dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, son of Simon. As soon as Judas took the bread, Satan entered into him. What you are about to do, do quickly, Jesus told him, but no one at the meal understood why Jesus said this to him. Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the Feast, or to give something to the poor. As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night. When he was gone, Jesus said, Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once. My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. Simon Peter asked him, Lord, where are you going? Jesus replied, Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later. Peter asked, Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you. Then Jesus

answered, Will you really lay down your life for me? I tell you the truth, before the cock crows, you will disown me three times! (John 13:21-33.36-38)

Our accessible God To a very great extent our appreciation of the Christ of the Gospels will depend on our appreciation of God. God is so often referred to in literature and human discourse that one wonders whether, because of the constant and casual reference to him, in effect his name is often taken in vain. By that I mean that we may easily refer to God with nothing like the reverence we should have. We can never gain an adequate idea of the all-holy, transcendent and sovereign God, but we must strive to gain some idea of him — if we are to enter into relations with him and also to appreciate Jesus Christ. God! A simple three-letter word, denoting the unlimited Being on whom all else constantly depends. God is the greatest marvel for the mind of man, and yet we so easily disregard and even slight him. But the next marvel is that this one God *became man*. Pure, limitless Being took to himself a limited human nature, and there we had a man

walking the earth who was God. The text of St John's Gospel would suggest that John the Baptist had a knowledge of this in some sense. He declares that he saw the Spirit descending on him, and that he has borne witness that *Jesus is the Son of God* (John 1: 34). It is plain that John the evangelist means to say that the Baptist knew that Jesus was divine. How awesome is this fact! To think that people were mixing freely with the God of all things, visible and invisible! No wonder that John the Baptist once said that he was not worthy to undo his sandal-straps. In our Gospel today our Lord, the divine Son of the Living God, was dining with his disciples at the momentous Last Supper. Consider the familiarity with which John the Evangelist, the youngest of the Apostolic band, treated our Lord (John 13:21 33.36-38). He simply bent back from where he was reclining at table, leant his head on Jesus' breast, and posed his question that was meant to pierce the terrible news just announced. *Lord, who is it?* Our Lord accepted the confidence, and gave his own confidence by revealing to John the identity of the

betrayed. It was the first time he had done this — but my point here is that John's confidence shows the extraordinary accessibility that characterised God the Son made man.

His accessibility is also shown by the betrayal. For months upon months Christ perceived the descent of Judas Iscariot. We have no idea when Judas began to be seriously disaffected with Jesus Christ. He must have begun enthusiastically and with great promise: Christ chose him out of his disciples to be his formal companion and sharer in his ministry. He had begun well and like the others could have become a great saint. But by the time of Christ's announcement of the doctrine of the Eucharist in the Synagogue of Capernaum, Judas was, in Christ's words, a "devil" (John 6: 70-71). But the way Christ said this, and the way he continued to treat Judas, meant that no-one ever suspected that Judas was turning away from Jesus. Judas, it seems, did not accept the doctrine of the Eucharist. Simon Peter professed faith in our Lord as the Messiah and Son of God. Judas did not believe this. We

do have a record of one rebuke that Christ gave to Judas, but it was not severe — and nothing of the severity with which our Lord rebuked Simon for trying to dissuade him from the Cross. That occasion was Judas' criticism of Mary the sister of Lazarus for anointing the feet of Christ with the precious nard. All along, Christ allowed him full membership in the Apostolic body. He never withdrew his precious gift. Judas had constant, easy and immediate access to our Lord despite the mounting sin in his heart. Jesus, son of God and promised Messiah, was accessible to the best and to the worst. Let us also remember that while our Lord lashed the guilty scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy and other sins, he did nothing of this with Judas. Judas continued to receive Christ's smile and his share of the life of the Apostolic band, all this despite the profound offence that his sin-laden and unrepentant heart constituted in the sight of Jesus Christ. There would have been no doubt as to Christ's knowledge of Judas's heart — we read in John 2:25 that no-one needed to tell him about

anyone. He knew what was in the heart of man. The point is that in Christ, God was amazingly accessible to all.

Let us preserve and nourish in our hearts a profound sense of the wonder and marvel of Jesus Christ, utterly human, and fully divine. He is God with us, our Brother and our Redeemer. He is ineffably above us, yet ever so near and entirely accessible. He loves being with sinners, provided they want to be rid of their sin and reconciled to him. Let us be one with John the Evangelist as he leans back to place his head on the breast of Jesus, and let us shun with horror anything that may incline us in the direction of Judas — which is to say, deliberate sin.

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Second reflection: (John 13: 21-38)

Betrayal of Jesus The story of Judas is a great mystery, a profound tragedy. He was especially chosen by our Lord to be one of the Twelve, to be one of his special companions and to share in his personal salvific mission.

Before selecting the Twelve, our Lord spent the whole night in prayer to God, and then he made his selection. He must have loved Judas, and Judas must have showed much promise. Our Lord made no mistakes, but Judas betrayed him. He enjoyed the friendship of Christ, but came to prefer other things. What sadness must have come over our Lord as he saw how badly Judas was turning out! At our baptism, our Lord chose each one of us to be his close friend, and to share in his mission in some particular way. We were chosen for this, St Paul writes, before the foundation of the world. But it is possible for any one of us to turn out badly. St Teresa of Avila was shown her place in hell if she was unfaithful.

What sadness we will cause our Lord and the Holy Spirit if we make little effort to grow in an ardent friendship with our Lord. Let us make a firm choice for Jesus and for his path — which will mean the cross. Let us renew that choice daily. So then, now I begin!



Wednesday of Holy Week

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Phil 2:10, 8, 11 At the name of Jesus, every knee should bend of those in heaven and on the earth and under the earth, for the Lord became obedient to death, death on a cross: therefore Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Collect O God, who willed your Son to submit for our sake to the yoke of the Cross, so that you might drive from us the power of the enemy, grant us, your servants, to attain the grace of the resurrection. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 50:4-9; Psalm 68;
Matthew 26:14-25

One of the Twelve — the one called Judas Iscariot — went to the chief priests and asked, What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you? So they counted out for him thirty silver coins. From then on Judas watched for an

opportunity to hand him over. On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover? He replied, Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, 'The Teacher says: My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house.' So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover. When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. And while they were eating, he said, I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me. They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, Surely not I, Lord? Jesus replied, The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born. Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, Surely not I, Rabbi? Jesus answered, Yes, it is you. (Matthew 26:14-25)

Christ's forbearance One of the very fascinating things about the period of the public ministry of Jesus Christ was his knowledge of the complete turn of heart of Judas Iscariot. Quite frequently we read and see news of the latest penetration and arrest of conspirators in a country. It might be some crime syndicate, some international child pornography ring, or some spy agency working undercover in a country. It could be a terrorist cell. A military man is discovered to have been secretly collaborating with the enemy, and he is subsequently judged guilty of a capital offence. In the view of the host country, what these people are doing constitutes a betrayal. They are secretly planning harm to the country from within its own haven, while enjoying its privileges. The investigating agency may have been alerted to the suspicious activities of a person in one or other of these groups. An Internet agency notices unusual activity in a certain quarter and alerts the police. They then secretly pursue and exercise surveillance, and when all is clear and certain, swoop with an arrest. The point is that there is no

tolerance for conspiracy or betrayal. This applies to whatever side is involved. A mafia organization will not tolerate secret collaboration with the police by one of its number. The sale of state secrets to the enemy by an insider is viewed by the government and by society with the utmost severity. Would a friendship continue, and the enjoyment of mutual company, if it is discovered by one of the parties that the other is disloyal in some concrete sense — not just once, but continuously? No, and this is because that disloyalty is a kind of betrayal. As a matter of fact, the betrayal of good people by someone is one of the most despicable of crimes. Years after Kim Philby escaped to Moscow after having been discovered to be a secret spy for Russia against his homeland, Britain, he wrote from Moscow to his old acquaintance, Oxford's Hugh Trevor-Roper (1914-2003). I remember Trevor-Roper announcing that he would not reply to Philby because of his despicable betrayal. The strangest betrayal in all history is that of Judas Iscariot. He was chosen to be one of Christ's major friends and collaborators, but secretly

turned his back on this and became a *conspirator* against Christ.

Let us not here think so much of Judas, as of Jesus Christ in the face of this. We read in the Gospel of St John — and the point is made early in the Gospel — that when Christ was in Jerusalem (following the wedding feast of Cana and his move to Capernaum) many believed in him because of the signs he performed. But “*Jesus would not trust himself to them because he knew them all. He needed no one to advise him about human nature. He himself knew what was in man*” (John 2: 23-25). Christ could read the hearts of men instantly. At his first meeting with Nathanael, he described him as a true Israelite, having no guile. When James and John asked Jesus for the special favour of places at his right and left in his kingdom, he said these were not his to grant. More important was the question whether they could drink his cup. Yes, we can, they replied. Christ immediately concurred — *yes, you shall drink my cup!* He read their hearts, doubtlessly there and then gave them the grace, and knew they would in due

course drink his cup of suffering for him and the Gospel. But though Christ read hearts, people still had free will and could disappoint him. When the rich young man asked him what he needed to do to inherit eternal life, our Lord told him that he must keep the commandments. I have always kept these, he replied. At this, Jesus *looked on him and loved him*. He read his heart and saw much goodness and promise there. He thereupon invited him to become his close companion — *If you wish to be perfect, go, sell all and give to the poor, and come back and follow me*. But this promising young man went away sad. He refused because of his attachment to his wealth. Christ had also read the heart of Judas. On that great day when he came down the mountain and selected from his disciples the Twelve, he selected Judas. Judas had a wondrous vocation, and he responded to the call by entering Christ's company and taking part in his work as one of the Twelve. But what do we see? In chapter 6 of John's Gospel, our Lord announces the doctrine of the Eucharist, many of our Lord's disciples leave him, and our Lord says that one of

the very Twelve was *a devil*. He was referring to Judas Iscariot, St John tells us in the same chapter.

No one of the Twelve had the slightest inkling of the profound change of heart of Judas, let alone that he had entered into an arrangement with Christ's enemies to hand him over. But Christ knew this. He did not expose him. He neither quietly nor publicly threw him out. He did not punish him. He waited, doubtlessly showing kindness, not taking back the gift of his friendship and his call, and all the while endeavouring to save the soul of his chosen one who was turning out so very badly. Judas is the tragedy of the ages. He will be always known as *the betrayer*. But Christ gave him time, an extraordinary amount of time, to repent. In Christ we have revealed the merciful forbearance and patience of God. God is forbearing and patient, but we must repent. Let us not be like Judas, whether in big things or small. Let us not betray God by deliberate un-repentant sin.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 26:14-25)

Sin is a personal offence *“They paid him thirty silver pieces and from that moment he looked for an opportunity to betray him.”* So Judas deliberately looked out for the chance to betray Jesus. We have to regard this, then, as a deliberate, premeditated mortal sin. To commit a mortal sin, there has to be full awareness and full consent in respect to the commission of an objectively most serious sin. Our Lord said during the Last Supper that the Scriptures have to be fulfilled, but *woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. It would have been better had that man not been born.* Let us ask for the grace of a horror for all deliberate sin. And in respect to mortal sin, of course, we ought be prepared to die rather than to commit it. Indeed, in respect to any deliberate venial sin, we must try absolutely to avoid it. We must learn to look on all sin as a personal offence against a living Person, the Person of Jesus who is God.

Sin is a betrayal of friendship. Mortal sin is a serious betrayal of Jesus. It likens a person's action to that of Judas. It saddens the heart of Jesus, and saddens the Holy Spirit. It calls for a profound repentance. Thinking of the sin of Judas, let us renounce sin and resolve to be faithful to Jesus in everything.



THURSDAY OF THE LORD'S SUPPER (Holy Thursday)

At the Evening Mass

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Gal 6:14 We should glory in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom is our salvation, life and resurrection, through whom we are saved and delivered.

Collect O God, who have called us to participate in this most sacred Supper, in which your Only Begotten Son, when about to hand himself over to death, entrusted to the Church a sacrifice new for all eternity, the banquet of his love, grant, we pray, that we may draw from so great a mystery, the fullness of charity and of life. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Exodus 12: 1-8.11-14; Psalm 115;
1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-15

It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love. The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel round his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped round him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, Lord, are you going to wash my feet? Jesus replied, You do not realise now what I am doing, but later you will understand. No, said Peter, you shall never wash my feet. Jesus answered, Unless I wash you, you have no part with me. Then, Lord, Simon Peter replied, not just my feet but my hands and my head as well! Jesus answered, A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean.

And you are clean, though not every one of you. For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean. When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. Do you understand what I have done for you? he asked them. You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord’, and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. (John 13:1-15)

The ordained Priesthood The Gospel of Holy Thursday marks a special moment in the Church’s year because it celebrates an altogether special moment in our Lord’s life. *“It was before the festival of the Passover, and Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to pass from this world to the Father.”* The next day he would freely, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, offer up his life to achieve its redemptive purpose. St John the Baptist revealed that purpose when he pointed to our Lord and said, *“Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of*

the world.” This would be done by means of his sacrifice of himself on the cross on behalf of all mankind. By means of this sacrifice, expressing as it did Christ’s perfect obedience, the Father would be honoured and glorified perfectly. The offence to God arising from the world’s disobedience would be atoned for by Christ’s perfect obedience. It would then remain to make this sacrifice and its abundant fruits present in the life of every individual down through the ages, and this would be the work of the Church, with Christ as her head, the Holy Spirit as her soul. Thus would holiness be established where sin had prevailed. On the night of Holy Thursday the Church celebrates the principal means our Lord provided whereby the redemption from sin and the grace that sanctifies would be brought to each person in history. That principal means, apart from Baptism, was the Eucharist and the ministerial priesthood. At the Last Supper Christ instituted the holy Eucharist which is the summit and the source of the Christian life, and together with the Eucharist, the ordained ministerial priesthood which brings the Eucharist to the

Church and the world. He also designated his first priests, and commanded them to do this in memory of him. St John tells us that Jesus got up from table and proceeded to wash the feet of his disciples. This cleansing action was a symbol of the humble service he expects of all his disciples. But it was also a symbol of what Jesus had come to do for the world. He had come to cleanse the world of its sin. And this cleansing is essential. As our Lord tells St Peter, *“If I do not wash you, you can have nothing in common with me.”* We must be cleansed of sin and sanctified.

This cleansing of man in history Christ does especially, though not exclusively, in and through the ministry of his priests — in their preaching of his Word, in their celebration of the Mass, in their forgiving of sins, in their anointing of the sick, and in their ministry of the sacraments. Christ washes our feet every time we approach the Sacrament of Penance, every time we participate in Mass and receive Holy Communion, every time a seriously ill person receives the sacrament of the

Anointing of the Sick. The priesthood and its spiritual powers is one of the distinctive features of the Catholic Church. A Catholic who loves his Faith reveres and loves the priesthood. By and large the ordained sacramental priesthood was rejected by the new Churches of the Reformation in the sixteenth century. Accordingly, the greatest loss undergone by the Protestant churches was that of the ordained ministerial priesthood and with it the Eucharist that Christ had instituted. The Protestant churches maintained that the share in the priesthood of Christ possessed by the ordained priest is not essentially different from that possessed by the rest of the faithful. Holy Orders was not the Sacrament the Catholic Church taught it to be. This was part of their repudiation of the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist, Penance and the Anointing of the Sick — Sacraments that require the ordained priest. This Protestant teaching was explicitly condemned by the Council of Trent, which taught that the ministerial priesthood, that is, the priesthood of the ordained Catholic priest, is an essentially different kind of

share in Christ's priesthood than that possessed by the faithful. The priest, by the power of Christ, makes the sacrifice of Calvary present at Mass in sacramental mode and cleanses sinners of their sins in the sacrament of Penance. In general through his preaching and the sacraments, he makes Christ, the Head and High Priest of mankind, present in the life of the church. By his ordination, the priest is made a mediator between God and man because he is made an *alter Christus*, another Christ. He is empowered to assist all the faithful to become in their measure, but of course in an essentially different way, other Christs too.

For this reason, every properly formed Catholic reveres the priesthood and knows that through the priest the faithful gain access to God and his life. On the night of Holy Thursday we think of Christ's institution of the priesthood and of its essential role in the life and holiness of the Church. Let us ask God to give us a deep love of the priesthood, and that he will grant to each priest the grace to serve the faithful fruitfully. Let us all resolve to make

abundant use of the ministry of priests and to instil into our children a sense of the unique importance of the priesthood, so that they too will all their lives avail themselves of the ministry of priests. More still, let us pray that many young men will aspire to become ordained priests themselves.



Good Friday

Prayer Remember your mercies, O Lord, and with your eternal protection sanctify your servants, for whom Christ your Son, by the shedding of his Blood, established the Paschal Mystery. Who lives and reigns for ever and ever.

Or:

O God, who by the Passion of Christ your Son, our Lord, abolished the death inherited from ancient sin by every succeeding generation, grant that just as, being conformed to him, we have borne by the law of nature the image of the man of earth, so by the sanctification of grace we may bear the image of the Man of heaven. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture today: Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Hebrews 4:14 16;5:7 9; John 18:1-19:42 (a part of this is below).

Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your king?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar."

Then he handed him over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus, and, carrying the cross himself, he went out to what is called the Place of the Skull, in Hebrew, Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus in the middle. Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews." Now many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write 'The King of the Jews,' but that he said, 'I am the King of the Jews'." Pilate answered, "What I have written, I have written." (John 19:15-22)

With Christ in suffering I once knew a person who had lived a fairly successful life as the world would regard it, but, sadly, with very little love for God. Suddenly he went down with a stroke, and for the last few weeks of his life he was in constant physical agony, and in tremendous anguish at his utter helplessness. All peace of mind left him, his life had crashed, and he could not

understand why all this had engulfed him. His final days were for him an abyss of misery and hopeless struggle. His death with its unhappiness had all the appearance (to both himself and others) of being a tragic end to what seemed an otherwise fairly successful life. Many years ago there lived a famous psychiatrist, by the name of Victor Frankl, who was intrigued at how some people retain peace of mind and heart amid great deprivation and suffering. Others, such as the person I have just described, are virtually destroyed by it. Frankl asked, what did the former have that the latter did not? The answer was the possession of a sense of meaning in things — meaning gave purpose and shed light in the darkness. Human experience, literature and philosophy all bear testimony to the fact that one of the greatest problems for man is that he suffers, and at times indescribably. From a natural point of view, suffering appears as the great blot over the whole of life and creation. It seems to have no use, making life pointless. Now of course, suffering and evil are indeed a great blot on everything. God did not mean things to be thus at the

beginning. This we know from revelation — God has told us so. He has also told us that the biggest hand in this matter, the cause of the terrible mess that man is in, and of the evil and the suffering that is so prevalent, was and is man himself. Man caused it by sinning, by disobeying God both in the beginning and now. The result is that so much of the life of man is taken up with the work of avoiding suffering and evil.

Much of the purpose and structure of the religions of man is designed to relieve and rid man of his suffering. For instance, it was an important goal of the Buddha's life to find the answer to suffering — in the sense of discovering the way out of it. Buddhism has this as a principal aim. God's answer to man's question about the mystery of suffering comes in the example and the teaching and the Person of Christ. It is this — that Christ actually *chose to suffer* in the doing of his Father's will. He chose to suffer with sufferings which no human being could possibly imagine adequately. *I freely lay down my life, and I freely take it up again*, he said. He suffered in

atonement for all the sins of the whole world, all mankind. We read that “*they took Jesus, and, carrying the cross himself, he went out to what is called the Place of the Skull, in Hebrew, Golgotha. There they crucified him*” (John 18:1-19:42). It is commonly recognised by religious people that sufferings are often punishment for sins. Well, this was certainly the case with Jesus Christ, with this difference that the sins for which he suffered were not his own. Christ suffered in our stead. *Christ loved me*, St Paul writes, *and gave himself up for me*. He, the sinless one, was afflicted with suffering for our sake. We see in the Gospel account of his Passion and Death — especially, we might say, in St John — that he was not engulfed by his sufferings as someone lost in a great sea. He suffered indescribably, but he was ever the victor, turning his sufferings into the greatest of means for the achievement of his work. And this is what suffering can be for the Christian, for the one who follows Jesus. Our Lord said that the mark of his disciple is to accept sufferings after the manner of the Master. “*If anyone wishes to be a disciple of*

mine, he must take up his cross every day and follow me.”

So it is that obedient suffering is now the greatest means of following Jesus. Just as it was the great means whereby Jesus our Lord conquered the power of sin and brought sanctity to the world, so in like manner, to suffer in union with Christ will be for the Christian the greatest means of overcoming the power of sin and of growing in sanctity.

To suffer with Christ and in Christ is the path to goodness. It will, moreover, be the source of doing good for others. We win blessings for others by suffering in union with Jesus. Let us learn from the Passion and the Death of Jesus how to live and how to die, but also how to suffer, and how to make our sufferings the means of our sanctification. We do it by abandoning ourselves in suffering to God's will and offering up to him all the sufferings he allows for us.



Holy Saturday

(There are no liturgical readings for this day)

Scripture today: Let us consider John 19:38-42, the account of the Burial of Jesus

(After Jesus had died) *Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy five pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was near by, they laid Jesus there. (John 19: 38-42)*

Christ in death To say the very least, when we situate the Christian religion among the vast number of religions the world has seen, its doctrines are strikingly different. Firstly — and prescinding from the religion of Mahomet who himself was influenced by Judaism and Christianity — there is the unusual doctrine of one God. The usual doctrine in the religions of man is that there are many gods, even though a case can be made for thinking that some polytheist religious systems are in fact monotheist. I have seen it argued that despite its many gods, Hinduism is really monotheist. Similarly, despite the numerous gods of African traditional religion, it is often argued that in very many cases it too is really monotheist. Whatever about such debates — there is no debate about the monotheism of the Judaeo-Christian revelation. Of course, with this being granted, the Christian religion then separates from Judaism in stating that in Christ, God has revealed that while he is one Being, he is three Persons. The one divine Being is three divine Persons, each of whom is that one divine Being. This is an amazing

doctrine, and I would maintain that, quite apart from the very certainty of its having been revealed, it is beyond possibility that such a doctrine could be humanly devised — a doctrine able to withstand the intellectual examination of believers of the highest talent and goodness over the past two thousand years. But then there is a third stunning doctrine. It is that the second divine Person became man. There walked the earth One who was truly and in every way (except for sin) a man, and who was at the same time the living God. The one, infinite God on whom everything continually depended for its being, could be seen, spoken to, heard, touched. He could be one's friend, and indeed, he wanted to be one's friend — the friend of all. He spoke, laughed, he had a certain accent in his Aramaic speech, he walked with a certain gait, he would have spoken Greek and probably Latin with the accent of an Aramaic speaker, he had a certain build and certain features characteristic of his ancestry and race. He had a certain degree of physical strength — in other words he was a man. This was the

living God. His Self was divine, and he had taken manhood to himself, so that he was both man and God.

The next remarkable thing about all this was that God had come to redeem man from sin. Who cares about sin? Over the course of human history vast numbers have not cared a straw about sin, but God has revealed that it is precisely sin which has brought so much suffering and evil to the world, and that it is sin which takes man to an eternal death. Man must become immensely concerned about sin and avoid it — but of himself he can't. He certainly can't take it away. He is in its power and grip. He needs a Redeemer — and that is what God in his goodness decided to become. He came as our Redeemer. But look at how he did this job! He freely allowed himself to be submerged in obedient suffering. When Julius Caesar was captured by Cilician pirates, he paid his ransom, returned and captured nearly all of them and had them crucified, just as he had told them he would. But Jesus Christ, the living God become man, did not do this. Declaring who he was, he allowed himself to be reviled, slandered, openly opposed,

nearly stoned, nearly thrown over a cliff, eventually arrested, condemned as a blasphemer, struck, punched, slapped, scourged, crowned with thorns, dragged outside the City, and finally crucified between two criminals. This was the way God chose to redeem the world. Why was all this “necessary”? Our Lord said that it was “necessary” that he suffer and thus enter his glory. While we have been told that this was the way of redemption, we have not been told why it had to be so. Today we think of the lifeless, blood-stained and beaten body of Jesus Christ the Son of the living God, Redeemer of man and second divine Person, lying in death in the tomb near Golgotha. The living Soul of Jesus has descended to the realm of the dead, to those numerous just souls awaiting the Passover their Redeemer would accomplish in Jerusalem. By his Passion and Death he has won the victory, and he was now among them to announce the opening of the Gates on high. Imagine the meeting of Jesus with his foster-father Joseph, his meeting with Abraham, Moses, David, the prophets and all those holy souls such as Simeon, Anna, Elizabeth,

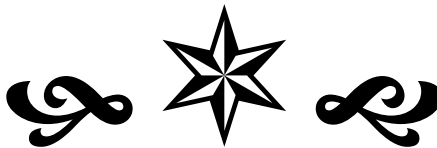
Zechariah, John the Baptist. It was a day of rejoicing among those who, like the poor man Lazarus of our Lord's parable, were in the arms of Abraham. Soon they would all be with Christ in Paradise, as would the Good Thief who had died with him at Calvary.

There lies the body of Jesus Christ in the tomb. Soon, early on the morrow, Christ will rise body and soul glorious to meet his stunned and ecstatic disciples, and from there he would ascend to his heavenly Father, the work of Redemption now done and soon to be brought to the nations. Let us in spirit stand at the door of the tomb, the stone behind us. We watch in reverence at the figure of the sacred body of Christ, covered with the shroud. All is still. Consternation reigns among the demons for they sense that something terrible is afoot. The Kingdom of God has come, and soon it will be present in power.





The Season of Eastertide



Easter Vigil

Collect: O God, who make this most sacred night radiant with the glory of the Lord's Resurrection, stir up in your Church a spirit of adoption, so that, renewed in body and mind, we may render you undivided service. Through our Lord Jesus Christ your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture for Vigil Mass: Genesis 1:1-2:2 or 1:1, 26-31a; Psalm 104:1-2, 5-6, 10, 12, 13-14, 24, 35; Genesis 22:1-18 or 22:1-2, 9a, 10-13, 15-18; Psalm 16:5, 8, 9 10, 11; Exodus 14:15-15:1; Exodus 15:1 2, 3-4, 5-6, 17-18; Isaiah 54:5-14; Psalm 30:2, 4, 5-6, 11-12, 13; Isaiah 55:1-11; Isaiah 12:2-3, 4, 5-6; Baruch 3:9-15, 32 (4:4); Psalm 19:8, 9, 10, 11; Ezekiel 36:16-17a, 18-28; When baptism is celebrated: Psalm 42:3, 5; 43:3, 4; When baptism is not celebrated: Isaiah 12:2-3, 4bcd, 5-6;

Epistle: Romans 6:3-11; Psalm 118:1 2, 16, 17, 22-23;

Gospel: Matthew 28:1-10

After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb. And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, approached, rolled back the stone, and sat upon it. His appearance was like lightning and his clothing was white as snow. The guards were shaken with fear of him and became like dead men. Then the angel said to the women in reply, “Do not be afraid! I know that you are seeking Jesus the crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ Behold, I have told you.” Then they went away quickly from the tomb, fearful yet overjoyed, and ran to announce this to his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them on their way and greeted them. They approached, embraced his feet, and did him homage. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me.” (Matthew 28:1-10)

With Jesus The death of the Lord was the greatest event of his life. He came into the world above all to submit to death, knowing that all mankind would benefit from the obedience of this step. As a result of his death the gates of heaven are open to us — provided we live and die with him. If we die with him we shall rise with him. That is the message of the Vigil of Easter Sunday. Our Lord constantly carried in his heart the thought of his death, for it was his greatest hour, the Passover he would accomplish in Jerusalem. His work on earth would be accomplished especially then, when he would give himself to his heavenly Father at his death. When it arrived he cried out, *“It is accomplished.”* Just as our Lord knew that his great hour was always ahead of him, so too we know that our great hour is ahead of each of us. God our Father has marked that last hour on our calendar, just as he marked our Lord’s hour. Our Lord often referred to his “hour.” When our “hour” comes, there is only one thing that will matter to me: will the door I pass through be the door of heaven, or the terrible door, the door dark and terrible

beyond description, that of hell? That this moment will come upon me, is more certain than that the moment upon me now is quickly passing — indeed, that it has now passed and that the next moment is now upon me. What I must do then is make sure that when that solemn and momentous hour comes, I have taken my stand firmly with Jesus. If I go through that hour with Jesus, all will be well. Let me think of Calvary. Let me think of Jesus on the Cross, and beside him that criminal whom we call Dismas. He turned to Jesus and said, *Jesus — remember me when you come into your kingdom!* How grand! *I promise you,* the King replied, *this day you will be with me in Paradise.* Just as Jesus Christ rose, so will I if I am with Jesus, as Dismas was with Jesus. But if at that hour I am not with Jesus, where shall I go? I shall be lost in unending darkness without him who is the Light of the world. So then, let me begin right now to make sure that when that great hour comes, I shall be found with Jesus Christ. Indeed, I must resolve right now to be with Jesus, and then keep with him every day and moment till that hour comes. If I slip away

from him, I must repent and regain his hand as Simon, sinking into the waves, took hold of the hand of Jesus.

But now, in this holy work of getting to heaven, I have so much, indeed everything, going for me. There is no reason why I should not make it, provided I truly want it. St Thomas Aquinas was asked once, it is said, how to be a saint. He said: Really want it! This is so because, firstly, God for his part wants me in heaven. That is the only reason why he made me and why he keeps me in existence. That is why he sent his Son to die for me. He loves me and wants to share his life with me for ever and ever. But actually, I for my part want to be in heaven. I want to be there with every fibre of my being. I want to be a saint! My whole being is hungering and thirsting for God and union with him, even though I may not realize this. St Augustine writes that, *“You have made us for Yourself, O God, and we will be ever restless till we rest in You.”* And so it is that I will be always restless till I am resting in God. I shall never be perfectly happy until I am resting in God, and finally with him in heaven. And if, alas, alas, alas! If I

do not get there, well, dear me! Our Lord said of the one who betrayed him that *it would have been better for that man if he had not been born*. If I don't get there, it will be the greatest possible calamity, the greatest disaster, the greatest catastrophe imaginable. We speak of the holocaust. This will be the mother of all holocausts, an eternity in hell. Yes, if I don't get there, I will never enjoy the direct vision of Him for whom I have been created, the One in whom my happiness lies, the One who is unimaginably good and loving. I will never be with the angels, the saints, my family and friends, I will never be where God intended me to be. Our Lord at the Last Supper said, *I go to prepare a place for you so that where I am you may be too*. If I do not get there, I shall miss out forever on the place God has prepared for me. Our Lord once said, *"What does it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, but lose his own soul?"* I shall be lost forever. But if I make it my business, and use the means, I can truly hope to make it to heaven, because God gave me the all the means for getting there. He gave it all to me and it is there for me in

the bosom of the Church, the Church which is his creation and my spiritual mother. From the Church, Christ's body, I know the exact directions, and have every help I may need. The great means to get there is this: I must take my stand with Jesus, and remain by his side all through life. I must never break ranks with him and make off on my own in the opposite direction. This is mortal sin: it is the worst and most stupid thing I can do.

On the Easter Vigil, I take my stand with Jesus, and renounce sin and Satan. The renewal of our baptismal promises is an essential part of the Easter Vigil. Let us renew our promise to love Jesus, to renounce sin, and to live by the grace of Christ available through prayer and the Sacraments. Let us resolve to be with Jesus now, and at the hour of our death. Let us resolve to pray daily. Let us receive the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist regularly and with deep piety. Let us strive to fulfil our daily duties and vocation in a way that will please God. Let us listen to the Church our mother and to follow her teachings, knowing that the Church's teachings are the

teachings of Jesus Christ. Thus may we aspire to live with Jesus and to die with him, and thus rise and reign with him.



Easter Sunday

At Mass during the Day

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 139 (138):18, 5-6 I have risen, and I am with you still, alleluia. You have laid your hand upon me, alleluia. Too wonderful for me, this knowledge, alleluia, alleluia.

Or:

Lk 24: 34; Cf. Rev 1:6 The Lord is truly risen, alleluia. To him be glory and power for all the ages of eternity, alleluia, alleluia.

Collect O God, who on this day, through your Only Begotten Son, have conquered death and unlocked for us the path to eternity, grant, we pray, that we who keep the solemnity of the Lord's Resurrection may, through the renewal brought by your Spirit, rise up in the light of life. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 10:34a,37-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 16-17, 22-23; Colossians 3:1-4 or I Cor. 5:6b-8; John 20:1-9

On the first day of the week, Mary of Magdala came to the tomb early in the morning, while it was still dark, and saw the stone removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and told them, “They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don’t know where they put him.” So Peter and the other disciple went out and came to the tomb. They both ran, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and arrived at the tomb first; he bent down and saw the burial cloths there, but did not go in. When Simon Peter arrived after him, he went into the tomb and saw the burial cloths there, and the cloth that had covered his head, not with the burial cloths but rolled up in a separate place. Then the other disciple also went in, the one who had arrived at the tomb first, and he saw and believed. For they did not yet understand the Scripture that he had to rise from the dead. (John 20:1-9)

The risen Christ, the power of God

Perhaps the first thing we think of, when thinking of God, is his *power*. Man has prayed to God, or to his gods, especially because of his *power*. He reverences him because of his *power*. We believe in God the Father *almighty*. That is to say, He has revealed himself to be almighty. On this day when we celebrate the Resurrection of the Lord, let us think of his Resurrection as displaying God's power. This same power is at work in our lives enabling us to seek and attain holiness. It is the power of God that gives us our hope in our fight against that other power, which is the Prince of darkness and sin. During Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday the Church relives the Passion and Death of our Lord. St John tells us that when Judas went out during the Last Supper, *it was night*. The Prince of Darkness had arrived and was summoning his own to join him in his darkness. When the crucified Christ was approaching his death, St John says that *darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour*. In all of history there was no one with the holiness, the greatness, the moral strength and spiritual

beauty of Jesus Christ. In him *dwelt the fullness of the Godhead bodily*. And there he was dead on the cross, brought to that state by the powers of darkness. And so, gazing on the crucified Christ, dead and then buried, we are shown what the Prince of darkness and the dominion of sin can do. Scripture is full of teaching on the power of sin, but its greatest illustration is the spectacle of the all-holy Christ, dead on the cross. On the one hand, we are born with the God-given desire to be good, really good. It is a law which our nature lays down before us, that we strive to be good. And yet there is another law within, a law fighting against our desire for goodness, a law which we could never overcome of ourselves. It is the law inclining and directing us to sin. And we see the power of this law of sin manifested in what it did to Christ, Christ dead on the cross, Christ who is holiness personified. We want to be good and holy. But our problem is that we also want to sin, and we tend to want to sin far more than to be good.

How can we be saved from this condition, which takes us down the path to death? We can be saved, and we

will be saved if we so choose, by cooperating with the power of God. That power was at work in Christ as he offered himself up as a victim for our sakes in the midst of his sufferings. It was the same power whereby he rose from the dead, and this divine power is far greater than the power of darkness. Our Lord referred to himself as the much stronger man who despoils the strong man guarding his house and possessions. Precisely in the midst of his overwhelming sufferings, the power of Christ was at work accepting and offering up his agony in obedience to the will of his Father. It was by the power of the Holy Spirit that he gave himself up as a victim for the sins of the world. His passion and death were a triumph of obedience, opposing the disobedience of Satan and our first parents. So while the cross of Christ shows the power of sin, it manifests more still *the holiness of Christ*, which is the power of God. But the greatest manifestation of the power of Christ and the Holy Spirit who always guided him and impelled him on, was his resurrection from the dead. The darkness of death, manifesting the Prince of darkness and

sin, was overcome by the Light of the world rising triumphantly in a new life. In Christ was life, and that life was the light of men. Christ's resurrection, which we celebrate on Easter Sunday, was the power of God breaking the power of sin and death, and showing forth its glory. Let us appreciate more and more the power of God, enabling us to seek and obtain personal holiness. Let us seek to be thoroughly good in mind, heart, word and deed, good with a share in the goodness of the all-holy Jesus. It is the one ambition God asks all of us to have, to seek to be holy. Holiness consists in union with Jesus. How can we do it, considering the obstacles presented by our sinful nature? We do it by means of the power of God at work in Jesus offering himself up on the cross and then rising from the dead.

We call this power at work for our sanctification his *grace*. Mary was *full of grace*. Grace is available to us in the life and ministry of the Church, in her sacraments, in her preaching, and in our personal prayer. Let us resolve this Easter to do all we can to live by the power of God,

which is to say, to live in and by his grace. Let us determine to love Jesus with all our heart, to live for him in the generous daily practice of our faith, and to die for him when that great moment comes.



Monday within the Octave Of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Ex 13:5, 9 The Lord has led you into a land flowing with milk and honey, that the law of the Lord may always be on your lips, alleluia.

Or:

The Lord has risen from the dead, as he said; let us all exult and rejoice, for he reigns for all eternity, alleluia.

Collect O God, who give constant increase to your Church by new offspring, grant that your servants may hold fast in their lives to the Sacrament they have received in faith. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 2:14, 22-33; Psalm 16:1-2a, 5, 7-11;
Matthew 28:8-15

So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus

met them. Greetings, he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me. While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble. So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day. (Matthew 28:8-15)

Go to Galilee! Our passage today is from the Gospel of St Matthew, and there is an intriguing feature of his account of the Resurrection. The Gospels are at one in reporting the encounter of the women with the angels at the empty tomb. Matthew reports it (28:5) as does Mark (16:5) — both featuring but one angel. Luke in 24:4

reports two angels as does John in 20:13. We remember that in Matthew's account of the Passion, following the Last Supper our Lord tells his disciples that after he has risen he *will go before them to Galilee* (26:32). Matthew tells us that at the empty tomb the angel informs the women that Jesus has risen and that he goes before the disciples *into Galilee* where he will see them. On their way to the disciples to tell them this, they meet the risen Jesus himself, as we read in our Gospel today. Christ confirms the words of the Angel: they are to tell the disciples that they are *to go to Galilee* where they will see him. There is no mention in Matthew of the appearances of Christ to his other disciples *in Jerusalem*. All we read is that "*The eleven went away into Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had appointed*" (Matthew 28:16). Matthew is not denying that there were appearances of Jesus to his disciples in Jerusalem, but he chooses not to mention them — though they were very important, as we read in the other Gospels. In *St Mark's* account, during the Last Supper (not after it, as in Matthew) Christ tells his disciples that after

he has risen he will go before them *into Galilee* (14: 28). But while the angel at the empty tomb directs the women to tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus goes before them *to Galilee*, there is no further reference to nor description of their meeting with Jesus in Galilee. Of course, it has to be remembered that Mark's resurrection account is probably made up of different texts, with a new fragment appearing (Mark 16:8-9) after the mention by the Angel of the coming meeting in Galilee, and possibly a third fragment after that (16:9-20). In these texts the chapter reports on Mary Magdalene, the appearance of Christ to the eleven at the meal in Jerusalem, his giving to them of their commission to preach the Gospel to all, the Ascension and their missionary departure — with the location of these last two not explicitly given. St Luke reports the appearances of Christ — all in or near Jerusalem — to the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, to Simon (24:34) and to the Eleven. It is at this latter meeting in Jerusalem that they are granted to understand the Scriptures and their universal mission. The Holy Spirit is promised, Christ ascends to

heaven outside the City, and the disciples return to Jerusalem to await the Holy Spirit. There is no mention of Galilee. In John's account, apart from the appearance of Christ to one of the women (Mary Magdalene), there is the appearance to the Eleven in the Upper Room, the granting of the Holy Spirit and their mission, and the proclamation of Christ's divinity by Thomas. There at chapter 20 the Gospel, it seems, would have ended (verses 30-31), were it not for what looks to have been a later addition (chapter 21). It is only then that an appearance by Christ in Galilee is presented (21:1).

It is intriguing that Matthew is the only one of the synoptic Gospels who describes the post-resurrection sojourn in Galilee. There is the Galilee episode in Chapter John 21, and it is generally agreed that this chapter was probably added by a later (inspired) compiler or author, other than John himself. So St Matthew, without denying a commissioning in Jerusalem, chooses to give great solemnity to the event on the mountain in Galilee where Jesus had told them to assemble. We can only speculate on

the reason for this exclusive emphasis, but I would suggest the following. Matthew has already showed that the chief priests and elders had schemed to have guards assigned to Christ's tomb so as to forestall any action of the disciples to spirit away the body and begin a rumour of his resurrection. Their nemesis had been successfully crucified, but they remembered very well that while alive he had foretold his own resurrection after three days. Were this notion to get out and about, the situation would be far worse than before (Matthew 27: 64). But now there was this sudden turn of events — the guards had returned with their story of a miraculous event at the tomb (28:11). So they now schemed again, this time to negate the effects of news from the guards themselves. It bespeaks blindness, wilfulness and a stubborn hostility to the Light on the part of the highest echelons of the chosen people. Matthew, I suggest, in omitting reference to the appearances of Christ in Jerusalem may have been emphasising the consequences of the blindness of the religious rulers in the holy City. They had lost their opportunity. By recording only the

reunion in Galilee he shows that a new and in some sense separate beginning is now being made. The Scriptures had been fulfilled, but those formally representing the people had not accepted it. So they were passed over. There was a new beginning, a new convocation on “the mountain,” a new Sinai around the new Moses, a new Church which would be the bearer of the Kingdom to the world. Matthew chooses to show this by describing it being done not in the City but on “the mountain” in Galilee, the region of Christ’s origin and that of most of the Eleven — perhaps most of the disciples who witnessed him at this event (28:17). If this was not Matthew’s formal intent, at least we are reminded of it by his method of presentation. We could speculate further on the significance of this happening on “the mountain.” But let us not stray too far from our Gospel text today (Matthew 28:8-15) and in particular from the words of Jesus Christ to the women who are on their way to the disciples. They have nothing to fear. *The brothers are to go to Galilee, and there they will see him.* A grand new start is to occur.

Let us place ourselves in the presence of the risen Jesus with the women who meet him on the road. He is risen from the dead, and is about to organize his disciples for the greatest thing flowing from his resurrection. It will be the launching of his Church in its mission to bring him to the world. Let us take our stand with the risen Jesus, and cast our lot with him. Let us resolve to believe in him totally, and to live every day of our lives at his disposal for the one thing necessary: the conquest of the world for God.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 28: 8-15)

Realizing the resurrection of Christ There is an old saying, that familiarity breeds contempt. That is, if we are very familiar with someone, there is the danger that we will take that person for granted and fail to have and show due respect for that person. Our Lord alluded to this when he said that a prophet is honoured except among his own. A danger to our spiritual life is that we will take our Lord and the Faith — what he has revealed — for granted,

including the fact that he rose from the dead. Our Gospel passage today says that “*filled with awe and great joy the women came quickly away from the tomb and ran to tell the disciples*” (Matt 28:8). We too ought be filled with awe and great joy, but this will not be the case if we do not truly *realize* the reality of Jesus and his resurrection. All too often Jesus and his resurrection is just a thought, a mere image, just a notion. If we wish to realize his risen reality we must put all our powers of mind, heart, imagination and prayer into appropriating the objective fact of his resurrection. We must make genuine meditation on the resurrection a feature of the entire Easter season. In fact, meditation on the great realities of our faith must be an essential part of our daily Christian life, otherwise we shall simply take things for granted, and fail to realize them.

If this realization fills our hearts and minds, we too will “run” to tell others about it. That is to say, we shall be true apostles of the risen Jesus.



Tuesday within the Octave Of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Sir 15:3-4 He gave them the water of wisdom to drink; it will be made strong in them and will not be moved; it will raise them up for ever, alleluia.

Collect O God, who have bestowed on us paschal remedies, endow your people with heavenly gifts, so that, possessed of perfect freedom, they may rejoice in heaven over what gladdens them now on earth. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 2:36-41; Psalm 33:4-5, 18-20, 22;
John 20:11-18

Mary stood outside the tomb weeping. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the feet. They asked her, Woman, why are you weeping? They have taken my Lord away, she said, and I don't know where they have put him. At this, she

turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realise that it was Jesus. Woman, he said, why are you weeping? Who is it you are looking for? Thinking he was the gardener, she said, Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him. Jesus said to her, Mary. She turned and cried out in Hebrew, Rabbuni! (which means Teacher). Jesus said, Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: I have seen the Lord! And she told them that he had said these things to her. (John 20: 11-18)

It is the truth One of the famous Evangelical writers of the eighteenth century in England was John Newton (1725-1807), the Anglican (Evangelical) author of the well-known hymn, "Amazing Grace." Newton published the story of his conversion in his *Authentic Narrative* (1764), which quickly achieved popularity and went through numerous British and American editions and was

translated into other languages. Many regarded it as Newton's best work and it made him an international figure within Evangelicalism. It was the story of how — as Newton summarized his life on his tombstone — once an infidel and libertine, he was by the mercy of Christ preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy. I myself have visited Newton's tomb in the churchyard of Olney, Buckinghamshire, England. His well-known conversion was triggered during a storm at sea in 1748 when two great issues of his conscience finally burst upon him: his many sins deserving of eternal punishment, and the (historical) truth of the Gospel. Much could be said of his newly-acquired sense of sin, but what was just as important was that he became utterly convinced of the objective truth of the Gospel. It was the inspired record of *real facts*. This sense of the objective truth of the Gospels based on objective historical facts is of fundamental importance in the Christian religion. The religions of man are imbued with myth, which is to say, with the *story*. In the case of

the Gospels, the “myth” (or story) is *objectively true*. It really happened, at a certain date, and in a certain place. One of the greatest novels of the twentieth century was *The Lord of the Rings*, the powerful fantasy written by the Oxford philologist, Professor J. R. R. Tolkien. It is said to be the second best-selling novel ever written. Tolkien was profoundly interested in myth. He was a close friend of C.S. Lewis, and was a major influence on his conversion to Christianity — although Lewis embraced Anglicanism rather than Tolkien’s own Catholicism. One of the things which Tolkien taught Lewis was the importance of myth in literature and religion. Importantly, he taught him that, however positive was the role of myth in all religions, the distinctive thing about myth in *revealed* religion was that its “myth” is *true*.

This sense of the reality of the Objects of the Christian religion is a key feature in Christian conversions — or it should be. The genuine Christian realizes that the dogma of the one and only God, Creator of heaven and earth, is objectively true. This one God is real. Cardinal

Newman taught that it is the conscience that brings this home to people. Whatever be the way one comes to realize that the dogmas of God, Christ, the Incarnation and the Atonement, the divine element in the Church, the Christological meaning of the Sacraments, are all objectively true, it is precisely this factual character which is all-important. We must come to appreciate that Jesus Christ is an objective and living Person. The One who possesses all authority in heaven and on earth, the One who died for our sins and rose again to bring us divine life, is real and living. He is a fact, though unseen. If a person understands this, then he has passed an important line. Now, all of this brings us to our Gospel today (John 20: 11-18). Within a day, Good Friday, the foundation of the lives of Christ's disciples seemed to have been destroyed. Jesus was suddenly gone, snatched from them in a series of sudden and immensely brutal actions. He was no more. At best, the prospects were that he would become a mythical figure, a mythical memory, the stuff of religious legend, a powerful story to be told and retold, an ideal of fantasy

rooted in a limited historical setting. Myths of this kind are common — comic books have been written in countless numbers developing the myth of some past real figure. Take the myths of Buffalo Bill, Wyatt Earp, Wild Bill Hickok, Ned Kelly, and many other past figures good and bad. There was a past basis to them, but the more the past is looked into, the more the myth deflates. The “story” is not objective — rather it reveals features of the culture or religion which produced it. But the case of Jesus Christ is radically different, and what made all the difference was his rising from the dead. He lived, he died, but he truly rose again in the flesh — now, though, glorious. In our Gospel today Mary Magdalene is filled with the sorrowful thought that he is dead. She asks the “gardener” nearby where he might have laid him, for she wishes to take him away. But wonder of wonders! It is the risen Jesus who stands before her and quietly addresses her, *Mary!*

The news spread, and the same living, tangible, real and objective Jesus met others. He is no mere story, no mere myth. The distinctive thing about the extraordinary

story of the Gospel, which is what will be brought to all the nations, is that it is objectively true. The resurrection is an objective fact, and this is what gives to the Christian religion its distinctive character. Especially in this sense is the Christian religion distinctive. Its mysteries, so high, are objective realities, rooted in the objective reality of the risen Jesus. Because he is truly there, all that he has revealed to us is truly out there. It is not just the gradual effusion of the religious yearnings and imaginations of a people or the peoples. It happened, it exists, and what it promises will exist too.

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Second reflection: (John 20:11-18)

Love for the risen Jesus Our scene today is that of the conversation between Mary Magdalene who had been grieving at the empty tomb of Jesus, and the risen Jesus himself. Mary Magdalene, so full of love for Jesus, is a

wonderful model for every Christian. Delivered by our Lord from her demon-possession, she became his ardent follower. On the other hand we have Jesus our Lord, now the victor and Lord of death, unconquerable. Satan had been vanquished. Christ is *the Lord of lords, and King of kings*, and here he shows himself to be so human, so approachable, so loving: Jesus said, “*Mary!*” He addresses Mary by name, after playfully asking her why she was weeping. Then he gives her the work of telling the others that he has risen and is on his way to the Father.

Christ addresses each one of us by name too. He knows each of us through and through, and has called us from sin into a life of friendship with him. We are, in our way, in the position of Mary Magdalene. Let us love Jesus with all our heart, and go and tell all the others about him.



Wednesday within the Octave Of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Mt 25:34 Come, you blessed of my Father; receive the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, alleluia.

Collect O God, who gladden us year by year with the solemnity of the Lord's Resurrection, graciously grant, that, by celebrating these present festivities, we may merit through them to reach eternal joys. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 3:1-10; Psalm 105:1-4, 9;

Luke 24:13-35

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognising him. He

asked them, What are you discussing together as you walk along? They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days? What things? he asked. About Jesus of Nazareth, they replied. He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see. He said to them, How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory? And beginning with Moses and all the

Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going further. But they urged him strongly, Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over. So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognised him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us? They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon. Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognised by them when he broke the bread. (Luke 24:13-35)

All are called The event described in our Gospel today from St Luke is briefly referred to in the Gospel of St Mark. That Gospel is recognized as the account of Simon

Peter's recollections and preaching. St Mark's account of the day of the resurrection begins with the encounter of the three women with the angel, who told them that Jesus had arisen. They were to go and "*tell his disciples and Peter that Jesus goes before them to Galilee.*" In what might be a distinct fragment, Mary of Magdalene's meeting with Jesus is mentioned together with her announcement to the disciples that he had risen. Then, we read, "*after that he appeared in another form to two of them as they walked out into the country. They went and reported it to the others*" (Mark 16:12-13). Our Gospel today is Luke's detailed description of this appearance to the "*two of them as they walked out into the country.*" Luke's account of the resurrection extends over the last fifty-three verses of his Gospel. He describes how the women who came with Jesus from Galilee, who had watched his last hours on the cross and who saw where he had been buried, returned on the first day of the new week — early on the third day following his death. They had their meeting with the two angels, heard their words and went to the eleven to tell

them. Two of the women mentioned by Mark are cited by Luke: Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James. Luke adds Johanna as a third woman instead of Salome, who is the third one given in Mark. Luke does say, though, that there were “*other women*” too, which would include the Salome of Mark. We are then told that Peter ran to the tomb and saw the linen cloths. This is told at length in John, with John adding that he himself was with Peter on this occasion. In today’s Gospel from Luke we have the long description of what is only passingly referred to in Mark — Christ’s meeting with the two disciples who were walking out into the country. It occupies 20 of Luke’s 53 verses given over to the resurrection appearances (24: 13-33). Further, the two who were involved were not members of the Eleven. Indeed, on this point it ought be noticed that Luke gives more than half of his last chapter to Christ’s appearances to disciples who were *not* among the Eleven. Luke, himself a layman and doctor, perhaps is betraying a special interest in this feature of the resurrection.

Let us take up this point, because it can at times be thought that the advancement of the Gospel is only the work of the ordained or consecrated religious professionals. It can also be thought that they are the only favoured ones in terms of the life of grace. But as I have said, in Luke's last chapter on the resurrection of Jesus Christ, more than half is given over to the angels' appearances to the women, and then Christ's appearance to the two disciples who were not of the Eleven. In fact, Christ spent several hours precisely with these two disciples. There is no record of his spending so much time on the day of his resurrection with any others. We know that he appeared to others, but not as much time was given to them as was given to the two disciples on the way to Emmaus. This privileged pair were not of the Eleven. At least that is how Luke chooses to record it. Whether or not this stress in Luke was his formal intent, at least the fact reminds us of this point I am making about the average lay disciple of Jesus Christ, the ordinary member of the Church. Just as Christ took special notice not just of the

Eleven, but of the women, and then of Cleopas and his friend, so he will take special notice of each and every ordinary member of the Church and, of course, those outside the Church. We are all his close and special friends. He wants to be with each and all of us, and he wishes to spend time with each and all of us, helping us to understand the Scriptures and his teaching, and by his grace enkindling our hearts as he enkindled the hearts of the two disciples on their way to Emmaus. Look at him as he walks in company with the two disciples! He patiently and genially instructs them, dispelling their depression and creating anew in them the ardour of his personal love. He explains to them the meaning of the Scriptures and points to the Eucharist by his action at the table. Let each and every member of the Church understand that the Lord Jesus walks with them on their way through life.

We are all called to love Jesus Christ and to accept him as our Saviour, the Saviour of the world. He has broken the power of sin that bound us, and if we live by his teaching and his grace we shall be led by him through life

to our destination. Whoever we are, each of us has a special dignity in his sight. We are children of God by our baptism. He has not called us servants but friends. Let us make him our friend, then, and never do anything that imperils that friendship.

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Second reflection: Luke 24:13-35

The true path to glory Let us notice something about the conversation going on between the two disciples on their way to Emmaus. They were talking about all that had happened to our Lord in his passion and death. Our Lord had had so much going for him, proving that he was a great prophet by the things he had said and done. But it all had come to nothing. He had been sentenced and put to death. Our Lord joined the two without their knowing who he really was, and proceeded to show from the Scriptures how those very sufferings and that very death

were to have been the necessary means for entering into his glory. The glory they thought had so suddenly eluded our Lord, had been attained by means of his suffering and death. But it was an altogether different kind of glory than that which they had hoped for. It was the glory of heaven.

Let us take to heart the pattern our Lord told them was so necessary: suffering in the doing of God's will is the path to glory. Let us pray for the grace to follow that path daily.



Thursday within the Octave Of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Wisdom 10:20-21 They praised in unison your conquering hand, O Lord, for wisdom opened mouths that were mute and gave eloquence to the tongues of infants, alleluia.

Collect O God, who have united the many nations in confessing your name, grant that those reborn in the font of Baptism may be one in the faith of their hearts and the homage of their deeds. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 3:11-26; Psalm 8:2ab and 5-9;

Luke 24:35-48

Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognised by them when he broke the bread. While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, Peace be with you. They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw

a ghost. He said to them, Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have. When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, Do you have anything here to eat? They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence. He said to them, This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. (Luke 24:35-48)

Christ risen In the first book of Samuel we read that after the death of the prophet Samuel, Saul was

confronted by vast forces of the Philistines. He completely lost heart and attempted to consult the Lord whether in dreams or by the Urim or through prophets. So, even though he himself had driven mediums and fortune-tellers out of the land, he resolved to resort to one himself. When still alive, Samuel had told Saul that the kingship was taken from him and given to David. So we read (1 Samuel 28:8-25) that Saul disguised himself, and with two companions went to the woman of Endor by night. There he directed her, assuring her despite her fears, to call up Samuel. He wished to consult the deceased prophet. She did so, and Samuel rose before her — *“I see a preternatural being rising from the earth,”* she said. *“It is an old man who is rising, clothed in a mantle.”* Saul knew it was Samuel, and so he bowed face to the ground in homage. It is one case in the Scriptures of a ghost being summoned from the abode of the dead, and of that ghost telling a living person what is going to happen to him. Such attempts as this were strictly forbidden in Israel (Deuteronomy 18:11), for it could easily displace the

worship of the one God. In the ancient world ancestors were frequently deified. The point here, though, is that the reality of the spirits of the dead was commonly accepted in Judaism. When the witch of Endor saw the figure of the old man rising before her, she had no doubt that it was a ghost. There was nothing about it that was “in the flesh.” When she described the spectre to Saul, he instantly recognized it as a spirit. When Samuel spoke to Saul, he spoke as one on the other side of the grave. Saul had, he complained, disturbed him from his rest. He proceeded to repeat the woe he had pronounced on Saul when still alive. The next day would be Saul’s last. We remember how, when our Lord strode across the swirling Sea of Galilee in the midst of the storm, he was taken by his disciples to be a ghost. There he stood, rising and falling with the Sea, and said to them, *Do not be afraid. It is I.* As soon as he spoke, they recognized that it was no ghost but Jesus.

There is another feature about the abode of the spirits of the dead — it is not particularly attractive. When Samuel was conjured up, he speaks as one who has been

disturbed, but from a place that appears bleak. Nothing much is happening there — it seems like a twilight existence devoid of the full-bodied joys of this life. In our Gospel today (Luke 24:35-48), we read that “*the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognised by them when he broke the bread.*” This is a reference to the experience, lasting over at least a few hours, which the two had of the risen Jesus on the way to Emmaus. There was no question of their having spoken to a ghost. He was a real and normal man who had joined them on their walk and in their sombre discussion of the events of the past few days. When at table in Emmaus, they finally recognized him — and then he vanished. He was a concrete, living man, come back from the grave in the flesh. This is, as one might say, the “sticking point” in Christian belief. I clearly remember watching a television interview some decades ago with a prominent Australian politician. He was asked if he were a Christian, and he said that inasmuch as the resurrection of Christ is the yardstick of Christian belief, he had to be regarded as a

fellow-traveller of Christianity. He did not accept that Christ rose from the dead. Some years back there was controversy even in Catholic circles about the *meaning* of Christ's resurrection from the dead. It looked as if some theologians were maintaining that this doctrine was compatible with the proposition that Christ did not rise in his *flesh*. Despite all the subtleties, distinctions and qualifications, such a position is indeed incompatible with the Christian religion. In our Gospel today, our Lord appears to the Eleven in the room where the doors had been shut for fear of the Jews. The first thing our Lord had to prove to them was that he was not a ghost — that he had risen in the flesh, in his body. *“They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have. When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet.”*

As we contemplate the Gospel scene of today, let us appreciate with renewed clarity the wonderful fact of Christ's resurrection. He did not simply return to his previous bodily existence prior to his Passion and Death — as had Lazarus prior to his being raised by Christ from the grave at Bethany, as had the young man of the village of Nain, and as had the daughter of the Synagogue official. Christ rose in his flesh, but to glory. If we live in him, and if we die in him, we shall rise with him to glory. Let us take our stand with Jesus, then, and in him seek the glory.

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Second reflection: (Acts 3:11-26)

The power of Jesus in our life In the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 3:11-26) Peter explains his healing of the man who was lame. He said it was not done by his own power or holiness but by the power of Jesus. Faith in him had restored the man to

health. This same power is at work in Jesus still, and we encounter Jesus in the life of the Church of which he is the head. We encounter him in her ministry, in her teaching, and in her sacraments. This power is the power of Jesus who is God, and we call this power his *grace*. We ought entrust ourselves to Jesus where he truly is, especially in the Church's ministry of word and sacrament. He came to take away our sins and to sanctify us, and by his *grace*, his power, this can truly be done. Just as it was by faith in Jesus that the man was restored to health, so it is an active faith in Jesus' loving power that will bring us to sanctity. We must have faith in it, and cooperate with the grace that makes it possible.

Let us ask God for a deep faith in the active and powerful presence of Jesus in the life of the Church's ministry of word and sacrament. Let us seek Jesus where he truly is, and open ourselves to his grace.



Friday within the Octave of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 78 (77):53 The Lord led his people in hope, while the sea engulfed their foes, alleluia.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who gave us the Paschal Mystery in the covenant you established for reconciling the human race, so dispose our minds, we pray, that what we celebrate by professing the faith we may express in deeds. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 4:1-12; Psalm 118:1-2, 4, 22-27a;
John 21:1-14

Afterwards Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Tiberias. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. I'm going out to fish, Simon Peter told them, and they said, We'll go with you. So they went out and got into

the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realise that it was Jesus. He called out to them, Friends, have you caught anything? No, they answered. He said, Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some. When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish. Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, It is the Lord! As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, It is the Lord, he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. Jesus said to them, Bring some of the fish you have just caught. Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, but even with so many the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, Come and have breakfast. None of the disciples dared ask him, Who are you? They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came, took the

bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. This was now the third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead. (John 21:1-14)

Ever so real It has long been known that some people have an uncanny skill at interpreting features of the personality of the person whose handwriting they have before them. The flow of the lettering, the shape and strength of the script, all contribute to form the profile of the person whose writing it is. That some have such a skill makes sense, just as a set of answers to various questions can indicate a certain personality profile because those answers are set against a norm established by reliable research. It is an instance of what we might call internal evidence. The very document in question (in this case, the handwriting) indicates objective facts of which the document does not formally speak. That is to say, it tells us about the writer, even though there is nothing formally written about the writer himself. The evidence is internal to the document. A person who is steeped in the writings of William Shakespeare may be able to tell very quickly

whether a newly-discovered sonnet was authored by the great bard himself. The evidence would be internal to the sonnet — it is not because he has some evidence external to it, say, a contemporary letter from a different poet that establishes that poet's authorship. I remember reading of a priest who became a skilled amateur geologist. He was shown a piece of rock by a friend and was able instantly to identify the location of its origin. The rock, he declared, came from an area on the other side of the country. His evidence for this was internal to the rock. Now, over the past few centuries as religious agnosticism and atheism have gained ground, external evidences for the truth of the Scriptures have been the object of much attention. It is always most interesting when something of this nature is discovered. Probably, though, in the nature of the case, external evidence will always be very limited. I am not sure that any external evidence for the existence of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Elijah, Elisha, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and John the Baptist has ever been found — in the sense of, say, archaeological inscriptions, or truly reliable

references to them in the literatures of other societies. An exception may be Isaiah, for I think an inscription of him in ancient Hebrew characters on a small bulla was discovered in 2018 at a dig near the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. It was found just feet from the location where a similar bulla was found in 2015 which had the name of King Hezekiah of Judah on it. That granted, most evidence is internal to the documents and texts themselves, to the witnesses of the great tradition, their credibility, and so forth.

Now, look at our Gospel passage of today. We are speaking of a Man who has risen from the dead! As modern people aware of the power of the religious imagination and its undoubted capacity to project to the external realm what are but internal hopes, we would expect that a story of such a thing would have just a touch of the fairy tale to it. It is so far out of the ordinary that we would assume that it is fantasy. It being fantasy, we would expect that the narrative of it would be *like narratives of fantasy*. It would betray, in its very account, its fantastic character. Now, something of this issue was at work in our

Lord's own life. He was repeatedly pounded by his enemies, especially the Temple aristocracy of Jerusalem, with the demand for *external* proof. Give us signs from heaven, they would demand, for your authority! He did give them many signs of this nature, but he also resisted it to a point too. Instead, he insisted that they look to him, to himself. The only sign this generation will be given, he said on one occasion, *is the sign of Jonah. For just as Jonah preached to the (pagan) Ninevites and they repented, so will the Son of Man be to this generation.* He himself was the "sign" they needed. Our Lord was pointing, we might say, to the abundant internal evidence that was available in him. Look at me, get to know me, and you will have all the evidence you really need to be convinced of my claims. And indeed, the best way of gradually becoming convinced of the truth of Jesus Christ and his claims is to get to know him profoundly as a revered Friend. In the case of our Gospel passage today, look at its character! Jesus is risen from the dead! Now, the events portrayed have the character of calm and simple

ordinariness. It is all so real, so down-to-earth, so simple. Our Lord is there on the shore. He calls out. He gets breakfast ready. There is a conversation between him and Simon. It is what we would expect of *real life*. We almost forget, as we read, the marvel of Christ's resurrection from the dead. The disciples themselves, aware that this is Jesus who has died and is now risen from the dead, themselves act towards him as towards a normal, living man — and certainly no ghost. It is all so very real.

Yes, Jesus Christ is very real. One of the most important things in any true conversion to the Christian religion, be it a conversion of someone who is not yet a Christian, or a conversion of someone who is but nominally so, is the appreciation of the very reality of Jesus Christ. He is real, he existed, and he now exists. He was alive, he died, and he lives now. His claims are true. He is God, Man, and our Redeemer. The very reading of the Gospel texts can help give us this realization because there is a sense in which these very texts show forth their own evidence. They have all the signs of truth and reality. Let

us steep ourselves in the reading of the Gospels. They help us to know, love and serve Jesus Christ who is our life now and hereafter.



Second reflection: (Acts 4:1-12)

Jesus the only Saviour In the presence of the rulers, the elders, the scribes and the members of the high-priestly families, Peter made an extraordinary statement: that “*of all the names in the world given to men this (that is, Jesus) is the only one by which we can be saved*” (Acts 1:12). Peter was facing the leaders of the people who looked to Abraham, Moses and the prophets. Ultimately they recognised God as the *only* Saviour, and here was Peter claiming that *only Jesus* was the Saviour. The implication to them was, surely, that Jesus was claimed to be God. Peter here was also speaking against the backdrop of Roman rule, and Rome allowed for many

gods who could bring help and salvation in various forms. We see in Peter's statement the beginnings of what would ultimately lead to the fierce and protracted persecution of the Christian church by the Roman empire. Christianity claimed that Jesus was *the only Saviour* — and that no other 'god' could save at all. This great teaching about the absolute uniqueness of Jesus has profound implications for our attitude to the various religions of man and their great founders: Mahomet, Buddha, Confucius, whoever.

Let us then resolve to love Jesus with our whole heart, for he is our God and the only Redeemer of man. He lives and saves in and through the Church his body. Let us guard this doctrine and make it our business to bring it in all its purity and starkness to others, as did Peter, whatever be the cost.



Saturday within the Octave of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Ps 105 (104):43 The Lord brought out his people with joy, his chosen ones with shouts of rejoicing, alleluia.

Collect O God, who by the abundance of your grace give increase to the peoples who believe in you, look with favor on those you have chosen and clothe with blessed immortality those reborn through the Sacrament of Baptism. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 4:13-21; Psalm 118:1 and 14-21;
Mark 16:9-15

When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had

seen him, they did not believe it. Afterwards Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either. Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen him after he had risen. He said to them, Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. (Mark 16:9-15)

The Resurrection accounts As far as I am aware there is no credible and authenticated account outside of the Judaeo-Christian tradition of a dead person being raised to life by someone and resuming the life that he had before his death. It is occasionally recorded in pre-Christian Judaism. In 1 Kings 18:19, the prophet Elijah takes the dead son of the woman of Zarepath and carries him to the upper room of the house and lays him on his own bed. There he prays to God, stretches himself out on the child three times and calls on the Lord to give the breath of life back to the child. The child revived and

Elijah gave him to his mother. In 2 Kings 4: 32-37, Elijah's successor, the prophet Elisha, likewise lay on the body of a dead child, and placed his mouth on the child's mouth, his eyes upon the eyes and his hands upon the hands. Gradually the child became warm — and slowly revived. The prophet then gave him back to his mother. In 2 Kings 13:20-21 we read that after the death of Elisha, a dead man was hurriedly placed in the grave of Elisha because of a raiding party. The dead man, in contact with the bones of Elisha, "*came back to life and rose to his feet.*" Now, of course, none of these instances of persons being brought back to life can compare with the power displayed by Jesus Christ in raising persons from the dead. Our Lord does not pray that God would raise up the dead person. He himself raises the dead person at a word. He shows that he can give life to whomsoever he pleases. Further, Elijah and Elisha never promised to raise themselves from the dead, least of all giving the day when they would do it. Christ said he would rise from the dead on the third day. He had power to lay down his life, he

said, and power to take it up again. He repeatedly foretold he would do this, and he did it despite his disciples not expecting it. If ever there has been an exercise of almighty power it is this. But of course it was powerful in other ways too — it opened up the gates of grace and heaven. The greatest event in the history of mankind was Christ raising himself from the dead. It is the climax of each of the four Gospels. This having been said, let us pause to notice the historical and human elements that have gone into the formation of the inspired account of the Resurrection. Let us look at, say, St Mark.

The manuscripts of the Gospel of St Mark are not identical in their presentation of the Resurrection. Two important fourth-century manuscripts simply end after 16:8. Other versions of Mark's Gospel add a brief ending of some two sentences (verses 9-10) after verse 8. Most include the longer ending from verses 9 to 20. The important thing is what the Church teaches to be part of Scripture, and therefore inspired. According to the Council of Trent, the canon of Scripture includes all that is

contained in the Vulgate edition, and this embraces all twenty verses of Mark chapter 16. The New Latin Vulgate, replacing St Jerome's Vulgate, was promulgated by Pope John Paul II. Standard scholarship on the Greek manuscripts, such as that represented by the *Nestle* and *The Greek New Testament*, take the last chapter of Mark to be as the Vulgate has it. So then, with it clear in our minds that the whole chapter on the Resurrection is inspired, let us notice the variation in the texts that seem to make up the chapter. The three women arrive at the tomb and discover the great stone rolled back. Entering the tomb the first thing they see is not the empty tomb, but a young man clothed in white. He tells them not to fear. They seek Jesus of Nazareth, but he has risen. See! — the body has gone. It is then that they see that the body has gone. So they have been given notice of the fact before witnessing it. A second message from the young man then follows in verse 7, indicating that they were to tell his disciples and Peter that Jesus is on his way to Galilee before them. They will see him there. Then the women go. There is no

further report in the chapter of the promised meeting of Jesus with the disciples in Galilee. In fact, verse 9 seems to represent a new beginning in the account. Earlier in the chapter (verses 1-6, 7-8) we were already told of the arrival of the three women, their meeting with the angel, their discovery of the empty tomb, and their departure for the disciples. We are now told in verse 9 that when Jesus rose he appeared to Mary Magdalene, and she went and told the disciples. There is no mention of Mary the mother of James, and Salome. Then there follow resurrection appearances in the Jerusalem area, the ascension and missionary departure of the infant Church.

My point in outlining some of these textual variations is to hint at the scholarship that has been devoted to the inspired text. With different hands in the formation of the text being brought to light, we are able to see more clearly the different purposes and emphases of the inspired authors. It means that a new richness in our perception of Jesus Christ is possible. Each authoring hand adds certain colours to the inspired picture of the Saviour that is before

us. Let us pray for the light to see what God means us to see of his divine Son, so as to love him the more, to follow him the more, and attain life everlasting.

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Second reflection: (Mark 16: 9-15)

The Christian life is apostolic There is a long standing problem in the life of many Catholic Christians. They are often devout — though many are not — and faithful to several religious practices. But many of them have little or no apostolic spirit, despite the insistent teaching on this by the Church and the Popes. But right from the very beginning our Lord made it clear that the love and service of him — in which consists the Christian life — involves being apostolic, and by this I mean that it involves bringing the knowledge and love of Jesus to as many as possible. The word “apostolic” comes from the Greek *apostolos*, meaning an ambassador or envoy. In our

Gospel passage today (Mark 16:9-15) our Lord, having risen from the dead reproached his disciples for their refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen. Then he said to them that they were to go to the whole world and proclaim the good news to all creation. He is the good news.

Belief in the risen Jesus is not enough for the true disciple of Jesus. He must be very *apostolic* as well. That is, he must strive to be an ambassador, an envoy of Jesus Christ. As we begin every day our ambition ought be to believe in Jesus totally. But an essential element of this belief must be to bring others to this belief too. This will please God. The Christian life is essentially apostolic. Strangely, too many Christians have never realized this.



Divine Mercy Sunday (Second Sunday of Easter)

Entrance Antiphon 1 Pt 2:2 Like newborn infants, you must long for the pure, spiritual milk, that in him you may grow to salvation, alleluia.

Or:

4 Esdras 2: 36-37 Receive the joy of your glory, giving thanks to God, who has called you into the heavenly kingdom, alleluia.

Collect God of everlasting mercy, who in the very recurrence of the paschal feast kindle the faith of the people you have made your own, increase, we pray, the grace you have bestowed, that all may grasp and rightly understand in what font they have been washed, by whose Spirit they have been reborn, by whose Blood they have been redeemed. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 118:2-4, 1-15, 22-24;
1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

Now in the evening of that same day, the first of the week, the doors were closed where the disciples were gathered together for fear of the Jews. Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them: Peace be to you. When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples were filled with joy when they saw the Lord. He said to them again: Peace be to you. As the Father sent me, I also send you. When he had said this, he breathed on them and said Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven them; whose sins you retain, they are retained. Now Thomas, one of the twelve (called Didymus) was not with them when Jesus came. The other disciples said to him: We have seen the Lord. But he said to them: Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe. After eight days again his disciples were within, and Thomas with them. The doors were closed and Jesus came and stood in their

midst. He said: Peace be to you. Then he said to Thomas: Put in your finger here, and see my hands; and bring your hand here, and put it into my side. Be not unbelieving, but believe. Thomas answered, My Lord, and my God. Jesus said to him: Because you have seen me, Thomas, you believe: blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe. Many other signs did Jesus do in the sight of his disciples which are not written in this book. These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God: and that believing this, you may have life in his name. (John 20:19-31)

The Divine Mercy Let us place ourselves in the room where the disciples were for fear of the Jews. The risen Jesus came and stood among them. They had been crushed by disappointment and fear, and Jesus immediately gave them peace. “*Peace be with you*” he said to them, and showed them his hands and his side. Having given them a share in his peace, he gave them a share in his mission. “*As the Father sent me, so am I sending you.*” In them, the Church too was being given its mission by the risen Jesus,

and we are all members of the Church. This mission the disciples were being given came forth from the mercy of God. The mission was to bring Christ's redemption and sanctification to mankind and to all of us. With this share in his mission, our Lord gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit to empower them for it. Most especially, he conferred on them the power to take away sins. *"Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained."* Today then, we think of this mission of mercy given to the Apostles, and with it the power to forgive sins. It is the result and sign of the mercy of God, and for good reason the Church calls this second Sunday of Eastertide Divine Mercy Sunday. When we think of man's condition — our common condition, so prone to sin, so incapable of reaching the sanctity that God intended for us — we ought be profoundly consoled by the Gospel scene of today. Each of us has been given the gift of the Holy Spirit our Sanctifier. He is the answer to our deepest need. He is the gift and manifestation of the divine mercy. And through

his power as exercised by the priest in the Sacrament of Penance frequently and regularly received, our sins are taken away. Pope John Paul II, recognized by all as a great Pope, died on the Vigil of Divine Mercy Sunday — a feast he himself instituted. He was beatified six years later on that same day, Divine Mercy Sunday. If it were asked what was his great message to the Church and to the world, it was certainly the dignity of each human person. He taught that each person is not only a creature of God, but his adopted child with a personal calling to goodness and sanctity. Therein lies man's dignity.

Goodness and sanctity of life is attained by living as a child of God, united with God our Father. To think that sanctity of life is truly possible, despite the fallen condition in which we all of us find ourselves! Due to God's mercy, we have a glorious and attainable goal in life, which is union with God and the conquest of sin. This is the Good News of the Gospel, and it is the ever-recurring teaching of the Church and of the Popes, generation after generation. In mid-April of 2011, Pope Benedict XVI concluded two

years of Wednesday Audience talks on various saints and doctors of the Church. That last talk in this series, a series that was published also in book format, stressed that sanctity is open to each and every baptized person. He said that *“the fullness of Christian life does not consist of realizing extraordinary enterprises, but in union with Christ, in living his mysteries, in making our own his attitudes, his thoughts, his conduct.”* He reminded his audience that *“A holy life is not primarily the fruit of our own effort, of our actions, because it is God, the thrice Holy (cf. Isaiah 6:3), who makes us saints, and the action of the Holy Spirit who encourages us from within”*. In speaking of the attainment of sanctity, he stressed Sunday Mass, daily prayer, and the keeping of God’s commandments in a spirit of Christian love. We are all called to holiness, he said. Benedict XIV’s immediate predecessors, Pope John XXIII, Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II, are now canonised saints. The Causes for the canonization of Pope Pius XII and Pope John Paul I are well in progress, with Pius XII being already Venerable.

Each attained sanctity of life to an outstanding degree. By their lives and their teaching on sanctity they each point to the common call we all have received to attain personal holiness. This is the greatest gift of the divine mercy, together with the means conferred by Christ on the Church to make it possible for us. Each of us ought say: Well, they did it — why not, in my measure, me?

Due to the mercy of God we each of us can hope for heaven, and for the special place there according to the measure intended by God for us. Due to the mercy of God we have been given all the means we need — membership in God's family the Church, the word of God and the Church's teaching, the sacraments and all the helps to live a life of prayer and good works. Let us take up the great work we have been given, the work of being saints and calling others to sanctity. God in his mercy and by the gift of his grace can bring it to completion.



Monday of the Second week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Rom 6:9 Christ, having risen from the dead, dies now no more; death will no longer have dominion over him, alleluia.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that we, who have been renewed by paschal remedies, transcending the likeness of our earthly parentage, may be transformed in the image of our heavenly maker. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 4:23-31; Psalm 2:1-3, 4-9;

John 3:1-8

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him. In reply Jesus declared, I tell you the truth,

no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. How can a man be born when he is old? Nicodemus asked. Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born! Jesus answered, I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. (John 3:1-8)

Born again I remember watching a television series which featured several interviews with a prominent agnostic scientist — a physicist, I think. He was articulate and also happened to be skilled in philosophical thinking. At one point he mentioned a conversation which he had with a Catholic priest who was an acquaintance of his. The priest asked him why he did not believe in Christ and his Church. The scientist gave a reply that also showed his knowledge of Catholic teaching. He said, Father, it is

because I do not have the gift of faith. In our Gospel today our Lord tells Nicodemus that “*no-one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.*” This rebirth of water and the Spirit occurs at our baptism. It is of help to a person’s faith if he can identify some of the ways this rebirth is evident in his own life. For instance — a child is born on a farm in a fairly remote rural area. She is baptised in the village church where there is Mass once a month when the priest comes, doing his rural rounds. She grows up on the farm, helping with the animals, the crops, in the house. She has some education and gets to a little beyond primary school, then remains on the farm. She is winning, friendly, unselfish, intelligent, but what is especially notable about her is her Catholic *faith*. She does not settle for the monthly Mass in her own village church. Every Sunday she mounts her horse and rides to a more distant church where she will attend Mass and receive Holy Communion, and perhaps go to Confession. On her own she learns to pray. She has a deep religious faith. Some might regard her faith as simply

a feature of her temperament, in much the same way as her gift for horse riding may be. But it is not. Her faith is the result of her baptism, supported by certain moral dispositions. It is a gift that came when she was baptised. Without perhaps realizing the importance of her religious choices, she has consistently been acting in accord with her God-given inclination to believe. By a supernatural endowment coming from Baptism, she believes in Jesus Christ, she loves him, she believes in the teachings of the Church, and she resists in her heart any doubts that might stray across her mind. Her faith is, as a matter of fact, the principal thing in her life. It is the main thing making her the kind of person she is.

She marries a young man from the metropolis and moves away from her rural origins to the city where she spends the rest of her long life. She raises a large family in her Catholic faith, sees out the life of her own husband and a couple of her own children. All the while her faith is growing and becoming strong. She lives her entire life in unflinching adherence to the faith of her baptism. All can see

that this is the principal thing in a life that is in so many respects good — morally good. She would never think of knowingly doing something that is obviously morally bad. At the root of all this is her faith in Jesus Christ and his teachings, as they have come to her from the Church. Her life is a sign of the power of grace, and it all began at her baptism. Of course, we cannot restrict the power and grace of God to its normal channels, and God could have helped her along in some extraordinary way had she never been baptized. But had she not been baptized, her life may have been utterly different. To begin with, it may have been dogged by religious scepticism, protracted religious doubt, and a secret refusal to believe. One of Saint Mary MacKillop's close friends in Adelaide was a non-Catholic. She was an excellent lady, and most generous to Mary whom she loved and admired. But she could not get over her constant religious scepticism. Mary MacKillop's religious faith was serene and undaunted amid the greatest trials. Her friend lacked religious faith and seemed unable to acquire it. This was, fundamentally, because faith is a

gift from God. For those not granted it, it ought be the object of the prayer of petition. It ought be requested repeatedly, and of course, God will grant it. It will open the gates of heaven, and set a person on the road to holiness. It is the first fruits of the new birth that our Lord speaks of in our Gospel today (John 3:1-8). I am saying that it is a very good thing for every believing Christian to become aware of his or her own faith in Christ. It is an encouraging thing for a Catholic to be conscious of the ease with which faith in Christ and in his Church has come to him. Faith is part and parcel of the new birth of which our Lord speaks in his conversation to Nicodemus today.

Together with our faith, God's gift to us at the rebirth which is our baptism, there have come two other great gifts that carry us on to union with Jesus Christ. They, too, are part of the rebirth of baptism. I refer to the capacity to hope in Christ, and especially our capacity to love him. These are gifts from God, not gifts from nature or temperament. They represent his presence in our souls by grace, and his action by grace giving us the readiness,

the facility, the habitual inclination to believe, to hope and to love him. Because of this, it is our joy to believe in Jesus Christ and to love him more and more. Let us be very conscious of the work of God in our life from the moment of our baptism when we were reborn of water and the Spirit, and the kingdom of God was opened to us.



Tuesday of the Second week of Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Rev 19:7, 6 Let us rejoice and be glad and give glory to God, for the Lord our God the Almighty reigns, alleluia.

Collect Enable us, we pray, almighty God, to proclaim the power of the risen Lord, that we, who have received the pledge of his gift, may come to possess all he gives when it is fully revealed. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 4:32-37; Psalm 93:1-2, 5;

John 3:7b-15

Jesus said to Nicodemus, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. How can this be? Nicodemus asked. You are Israel's teacher, said Jesus, and do you not understand these things? I tell you

the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No-one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. (John 3:7b-15)

Man the saint The most interesting thing about man, as against the merely inanimate, vegetable, sentient or animal world, is that he can be morally good or morally bad. A rock, or a tree, or a dog can be “good” or “bad” in the degree to which it measures up to its kind, but this is largely the luck of the draw. It has nothing to do with personal choice by the dog. A dog can be a “good” sheep dog, or win prizes in dog shows for the proportion manifest in its build and general gait, but this has been the result of the forces of nature and its training. Basically such an animal is a product — and there have been many

philosophers and thinkers who have thought that man too is but a product. But the sense of mankind knows that this is wrong — although to a point there is much in man that is a product. Man is responsible for himself, whereas the dog, the fish, the butterfly, the tree and the rock are not. Man finds himself with certain endowments and limitations, and he knows that he must now make the very best of himself. He cannot allow himself to be a mere product. He must take up the task that is himself and his future, and go where he knows he *should*. Part of this obligation will be to make sure he learns and discovers where he should go and what he should be. He is *morally obligated*, and yet he is *free*. He knows this, and others know it — and to a point they know *what he should do*. If he does not do it, then he will be held responsible for his actions. Yes, the most interesting thing about man is that he can be *morally* good or bad. To see this, one only has to look a little more carefully at what in effect constitutes the heart of media stories which dominate the annals of society. The main story of man is the story of his *ethical* life — what he

thinks he should do and whether he chooses to do it. If he consistently chooses the unethical course, the bad action, then he is pursuing a path towards ruin, whether or not society knows it. While the tree will be ruined if it is struck by lightning or cut down, not so with man. He may be struck with lightning or cut down by the forces of nature or his fellow-man, but if he has been following the ethical, the good, the holy course, he will not be ruined. His death, indeed, may be the crowning act of his good life and may take him to glory. Christ's being struck down redeemed the whole world. The drama of human life lies in the one critical question — *whether man becomes good or bad*.

But what does it mean to become good or bad? I do not think many people bother with such a question. All they ask is, am I, or is he, doing the right or wrong thing? — it is a fundamental question indeed whether one's actions are right or wrong, good or bad. But there is more to it than this, and it touches on the grandeur of man. Man is able to do the good or the bad thing, and as a result of his freely chosen actions *he himself* becomes good or bad.

How is man's moral condition usually envisaged? I suspect that modern secular man has the implicit image that man is essentially flawed in the moral sphere. Yes, there are persons who do very good things and they do them consistently — for example, Mother Teresa — but the generality of men and women are seen as at best morally mediocre. Even what we might call the various Mother Teresas of society are seen by many as having mixed motives and that there is a good bit of self-serving in their good actions. This, I think, is the general perception — and there is a good bit of truth in it. Classic Protestantism, with various exceptions (such as, perhaps, Wesley), sees no basic change in the human being himself as a result of Christ's grace coming to him. At the core of his being he is understood to remain the sinner he always was — it is just that God, lucky for him, chooses to look on the merits of his divine Son and attribute them to him. He is *clothed* with Christ, but remains, basically, the sinner he was. So while he may do good actions by the grace of God, he remains the morally besmirched creature he always was. It

is just that he is decked resplendently with the clothing of Jesus Christ. But no, this is not how it is. By God's grace he can become good. Now all this brings us to the Gospel of today, because the Good News is that Jesus Christ promises and brings *a new birth* at the core of our being. Being good does not simply mean doing good actions, but being good at the core of the heart — this is God's vision and plan. Man fell, but God has brought to him the offer of a new birth by the gift of the Holy Spirit that comes to him in faith and Baptism. Thus he becomes a new man and can grow in this new life by the power of Christ's grace and his resolute co-operation with it in practical daily obedience. Yes, he will sin every day, for as Scripture says, "*a righteous man falls seven times and rises again*" (Proverbs 24:16). But if he makes it his business to repent daily and draw continually on the great channels of grace, he can make progress in conquering sin and thus *he becomes holy*.

"So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. How can this be? Nicodemus asked." At our baptism we were born of the Spirit. It was a new birth in the life of God, offering

the opportunity of growing in true holiness, a holiness of the heart and soul and not of mere actions. This is the grandeur of man, that he is called to be a saint. He truly becomes holy if indeed he is living a holy life. If you are baptized, and if you believe in Jesus Christ, then you are a saint in the making. But what will become of this wonderful promise? That is the question, and you have it in your hands to do something about it because you are made free.

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Second reflection: (Acts 4:32-37)

Testifying to the Resurrection St Luke in this passage of the Acts (4:32-37) tells us that “*the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with great power.*” That is exactly what all members of the Church are called to do, each according to the grace given, and each according to the circumstances of his or her vocation. Too many do not testify to this at all, and so the risen living Jesus is unknown to so many people in secular

society. In an age when God is relegated to the status of a mere opinion, testimony to the Resurrection is immensely relevant. So how can we give this testimony and give it with power? Of course, it will be the work of the Holy Spirit in both the life of the believer who is called to give the testimony, and also in the lives of those who will hopefully receive the testimony. Granted this, we on our part must live day by day and with consistency a prayerful faith in Jesus as risen, the living risen Jesus who is present in the Church as her head. He is present in a variety of ways, but especially in the word and sacrament, and most powerfully and fully in the Eucharist. The risen Jesus, God with us, is especially the Eucharistic Jesus. We must live by this faith if we hope to testify to the risen Jesus.

Let us pray to Mary our mother asking her to help us testify by our lives, our words and deeds, to the resurrection of her Son.



Wednesday of the Second week of Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 18 (17):50; 21: 23 I will praise you, Lord, among the nations; I will tell of your name to my kin, alleluia.

Collect As we recall year by year the mysteries by which, through the restoration of its original dignity, human nature has received the hope of rising again, we earnestly beseech your mercy, Lord, that what we celebrate in faith we may possess in unending love. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 5:17-26; Psalm 34:2-9; John 3:16-21

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already

because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the judgment: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God. (John 3:16-21)

God loves us During the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, the Australian philosopher Peter Singer attained an international reputation in his discipline. Because of his publications and influence he secured an important academic position at Princeton, one of the very prestigious universities of the world. His principal interest was philosophical ethics, and his fundamental position was that of utilitarianism. The good is good because it serves the happiness of most, and whatever is most useful in attaining the goal of happiness is thereby good. From this sad philosophical principle which has a long pedigree, there

flows the justification of abortion and many other intrinsically evil actions. Abortion is morally acceptable because it serves to put an end to unhappiness. Indeed, there is no such thing as an intrinsically evil action because its moral worth is always determined by its usefulness in attaining happiness. I remember watching an interview with Singer that was on television years ago, and he was asked about the existence of God. No, he did not believe in the existence of God because if there were a God he would have done a much better job of the world. This, of course, is the greatest and standard objection to the almost universal belief in a moral divinity which is responsible for the existence of the world. It is similar, I suppose, to a situation in which we might find ourselves viewing a very bad piece of work. It is proposed that a certain person, one whom we know to be of excellent moral character and superb ability in whatever he may take on, is the cause of that bad piece of work. We firmly assert that it could not have been he who did it. So too, for Singer and many others, it could not have been God who did the very bad

piece of work which we call the world. Now, this is not the place to answer the (philosophical) problem of evil — one contemporary Christian philosopher who has been successful in this is Alvin Plantinger. I refer to it simply to raise the question of the fundamental and ultimate character of reality. Is reality not just a poor or bad job (and therefore evidence in itself that it was not “God” who made it), but also harsh, unkind, unjust, immoral in its ultimate dimensions? Just as it is quite legitimate to ask whether a person is good or bad, could we not ask the same of reality in its ultimate elements?

What is reality like in its ultimate elements? In fact, I think many people come vaguely to think — without formulating their thoughts clearly — that reality is not just a bad job, but in a more ultimate sense it is menacing, unkind, disregarding and morally indifferent. Prescinding from Christian and revealed dogmatic teaching, many would tend to think that, if a higher Power is to be granted, this Person must himself be morally indifferent — because of the way the world acts. The course and constitution of

the world — its natural disasters, its brutal repressions, its tolerance of liars and oppressive rulers, and so forth — suggest that reality in its ultimate character is not moral at all. Of course, others deny this assessment. For instance, a well-known philosopher of eighteenth-century England, the Anglican Bishop Joseph Butler, wrote (in *The Analogy of Religion*) that the course of the world does indeed show a moral character. The good are rewarded and the evil are punished, and in general the good life is upheld. That is how Butler discerned the character of the world — it indicated a *moral* Governor. However, to say the least, all this is debatable — if we are to rely purely on rational considerations. The world presents a mixed and somewhat inscrutable countenance. If it is a question of discerning a Person behind the veil that is the world, there have been opposite answers to the question about the ethical character of that Person. Singer would say that the world could only be, at most, the work of a morally indifferent Person, and this in the nature of the case rules out it being “God.”

Now, to this whole conundrum there has been an answer from on high. God has intervened to reveal that he loves the world. The Creator is an ethical, moral God. He is everlastingly good, and only wills what is good. As our Gospel today reminds us (John 3:16-21), he so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son to save the world from what has caused all the mess, man's own sin and his rebellion against his Creator. The ultimate Reality which is the Source of all that we know and see, and of all that is beyond what we can ever know and see, the final end-point or Ground of all that is, is *Love*, not Hate. Behind all the veils, there is a wondrously kind *Smile*, and Eyes full of *compassion*. Compassion, and not indifference, characterizes the ultimate Principle — which is a Person.

The world with all its personal and non-personal components has a Creator. It is not simply there by blind, mysterious necessity. It is not just a brute fact which simply has to be. It is radically unable to be of itself, and exists only because sustained in its existence by him. The Creator is Love, Love that is holiness. We caused the mess

by turning our backs on him. But he, good and loving as he is, took the matter in hand and sent his own beloved Son to save the world from its sin. What we must do is believe in his only-begotten Son, turn away from our sins, and live a life in accord with our faith in him — a faith that shows itself in obeying his commandments. Let us do this, then!

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Second reflection: (Acts 5:17-26)

Our guardian Angel The Acts of the Apostles tells us the inspired story of the infant Church and of those who played a part in the early spread of the Gospel. We are told in our passage for today that “*at night the angel of the Lord opened the prison gates and said as he led them out, ‘Go and stand in the Temple, and tell the people all about this new Life’.*” In this instance, the angel removed obstacles and gave guidance and direction as to what to do. Now, God has given each of us a calling to take part in the

mission of the Church. He has also given each of us a guardian angel to help us live out our vocation and so attain heaven. We can appeal to our guardian angel to remove genuine (not just apparent) obstacles and to give guidance.

We have, each of us, been given a heavenly friend. In this period of Easter as we prepare for the coming of the Holy Spirit, let us ask our angel to obtain for us the grace to be led by the Spirit of God day by day as we journey towards our heavenly homeland.



Thursday of the Second week of Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 68 (67):8-9, 20 O God, when you went forth before your people, marching with them and living among them, the earth trembled, heavens poured down rain, alleluia.

Collect O God, who for the salvation of the world brought about the paschal sacrifice, be favourable to the supplications of your people, so that Christ our High Priest, interceding on our behalf, may by his likeness to ourselves bring us reconciliation, and by his equality with you free us from our sins. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 5:27-33; Psalm 34:2 and 9, 17-20;
John 3:31-36

The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is

above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony. The man who has accepted it has certified that God is truthful. For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit. The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him. (John 3:31-36)

Belief in the Son A child is born into the world and then is cared for by its parents. It is not just abandoned. This is the most natural thing in the world, and we see it replicated universally across the world of living things. It would be a strange thing to see a living thing immediately abandoned by its parent. There may be instances of this in certain species of things, but I know of none. I have often watched birds attacking other things while their offspring make their first attempts at flying. They are protecting their young as those young begin to launch out and look after themselves. The child of human parents begins life being cared for, and of course it takes its

own life and existence for granted, with food, clothing and shelter provided. There is no immediate anxiety as to life and welfare — this care is unconsciously taken as being granted. Soon, though, the young learn that they must work at taking care of themselves. They cannot continue to take things for granted. If they are to get on with others and so make their way, they must work at being acceptable, at avoiding unnecessary offence, at being a good team player. If they are to support themselves in the future, they must prepare for that now by working at their studies, being successful in examinations, and so forth. They must develop skills whereby they can serve the community, and compete in the quest for employment. That is to say, life cannot be taken for granted. If they do not eat, they will starve, and if they are to eat they must work to support themselves and those for whom they have a special care and responsibility. Gradually from the sunny and unclouded security of childhood, they learn that not all is secure by any means — in fact, absolutely nothing is entirely secure in life. Life is radically insecure, and it can

be engulfed in a tragic destruction in an instant. I remember one priest I knew years ago said at his deathbed that he was grateful for the gift of life. He knew that life may never have been his were it not for the goodness of God, and even with the gift of life, all continued to depend on God for that life to continue and to flourish. If a person has his eyes open and reflects maturely on things, he will understand that, in reality, he stands and walks on a knife-edge.

The question naturally arises, or should arise: Is there *anything* upon which I can take my stand and be secure in life? All around me, there is the prospect of hazard and death. In the last analysis death is unavoidable, but I do not want it to come soon. However, I am threatened with it constantly, and I see so many people who succumb to this constant, imminent threat of death. Is there anything at all that can secure me from the oblivion of death, or the degradation of sickness and suffering? Well, of course, in the immediate sense there is nothing that can save me from these things, but in the last analysis — which is what is

important — there certainly is. It is directly alluded to in our Gospel today. Our Lord tells us that the possession of life eternal is open to us now. Right now in this present life, day by day and week by week, we can be living a life that is indestructible. It is not a “life” that is merely existence or survival. Nor is it merely the enjoyment of all that this temporal life may hold out for us. It is the beginning of what we shall enjoy in eternity with God. If we are interested in personal security then, or even more than mere security, if we wish to enjoy a true personal *flourishing*, we ought make it our business to be in possession of this eternal life. It comes from the hand of Jesus Christ. He it is who offers us eternal life. *I have come*, he said, *that they may have life, and have it to the full*. He was referring to the share in his own divine life that he wished to offer us. Our Lord tells us that the Father has placed everything in his hands, and that the one who believes in him has eternal life. *“The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life”*. So the key to the yearning for

true life and flourishing is to believe in Jesus Christ. Further, just as certain steps, if taken, will lead to the loss of the precious gift of temporal life, so we can *fail* to gain the life of Christ and, as a result, be lost forever. “*Whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him*” (John 3: 31-36). The stakes are high, and the choice is clear.

It is a very good thing to have realized at last that nothing in life is secure. It may even be said to be the high point of wisdom to which life should be heading. How important that we learn this lesson as early as possible! The next thing to learn with maximum conviction is that there is a means available to true security and human flourishing. It is belief in and union with the Person of Jesus Christ. In all that we do in life, it is above all Jesus Christ whom we ought be serving. If we are doing this, our life is planted on rock, rock that can never be shaken. Come rack, come rope — as we might say — all will be well. As St Thomas More wrote as he was preparing for the scaffold, *though I lose my head, I’ll come to no harm.*

Second reflection: (Acts 5:27-33)

Filling the world with Christ's teaching The high priest said to the apostles that they had “*filled Jerusalem with your teaching*” (Acts 5: 27-33). Our Lord had given to his disciples the mission of preaching the Gospel to all creation. Let us ask ourselves, what have I done for Christ in this respect? What am I doing for him? And what shall I do for him? When Pope John Paul II died, hundreds of thousands poured into Rome to pay their respects at his funeral. The media all over the world acknowledged him. His beatification in Rome six years later was a similar event. It showed that he strove to fill the world with Christ's teaching, and even though very many did not accept it, or categorized him misleadingly, the Church had in him a continuation of what the apostles did in Jerusalem, and what they were accused of doing by the high priest.

Let us, during these weeks of Eastertide, reflect deeply and at length on the mission each of us has been

given to bring the risen Jesus to those around us, and to fill our surroundings with his teaching. Let us ask the Holy Spirit to empower us to do this.



Friday of the Second week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Rev 5:9-10 You have redeemed us, Lord, by your Blood, from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us into a kingdom, priests for our God, alleluia.

Collect O God, hope and light of the sincere, we humbly entreat you to dispose our hearts to offer you worthy prayer and ever to extol you by dutiful proclamation of your praise. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 5:34-42; Psalm 27:1, 4, 13-14;

John 6:1-15

Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick. Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples.

The Jewish Passover Feast was near. When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming towards him, he said to Philip, Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat? He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. Philip answered him, Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a little! Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many? Jesus said, Make the people sit down. There was plenty of grass in that place, and the men sat down, about five thousand of them. Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish. When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted. So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten. After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, Surely this is the Prophet

who is to come into the world. Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself. (John 6:1-15)

Heavenly Bread There are many notable differences between the Gospel of St John and the other three Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. John appears to assume in his readership a familiarity with one or other or all of the other Gospels. He uses the space of his scroll to report fewer events while giving at greater length and depth the words of Jesus and their doctrinal significance. For instance, Christ's claim to divinity is far more explicit in St John. So, too, is his teaching on the Eucharist — even though he does not narrate the actual institution of it at the Last Supper. John seems to give us his favourite memories of the life and words of Jesus Christ, to which all his life he found himself returning. Perhaps he wrote them down as he recollected and pondered them with the help of the Holy Spirit, speaking of them to his many and various Christian audiences. Perhaps under the inspiration of the same divine Spirit they became his written Gospel, a

document of a very different character from the Synoptics. Mixed up with the profoundest of inspired insights were all kinds of historical details. Our Gospel scene today occurred “*on the far side of the Sea of Galilee*” and “*The Jewish Feast of Passover was near.*” It was “*to Philip*” that he asked where bread was to be bought, and it was “*to test*” Philip that he said this. John remembers Philip’s answer. Then John remembers that it is “*Andrew*” who reports that there was a boy present with five barley loaves and two fish. All these details show the historical character of the event, and suppose that John has long been contemplating the scene and the words of Jesus. He has never forgotten them, and in this he has been assisted by the Holy Spirit, given to him on the evening of the day Jesus rose from the dead (John 20:22). Well, let us notice one detail in particular which John takes care to mention. It is that the event now described occurred when *the Jewish Feast of Passover was near*. This is the first thing he says after Jesus sits down on the mountain to survey the scene, with the crowd before him. It is, we might say, the introduction

to the event that follows, the hinted backdrop for an understanding of the event.

As a matter of fact, the multiplication of the loaves is the only miracle of our Lord's public ministry (apart from the greatest of them, the Resurrection), which is recorded in all four Gospels. But in the other Gospels this miracle is not formally connected with the most significant of Christ's gifts to his Church, the Holy Eucharist. For instance, we read in St Luke that Christ took his disciples and went to the area of Bethsaida (Luke 9:10-17). The crowds followed him and he told his disciples to give them something to eat. They reply that all they have is "*five loaves and two fishes.*" We notice, incidentally, that there are not all the details here that John chooses to provide. As in John, there are about five thousand men, and twelve baskets full of fragments are collected. But then once the miracle is over the scene moves to another location where Christ is at prayer, after which he asks who people say he is. That is to say, there is nothing specific about a special meaning to be given to the miracle of the loaves and fishes.

The case is altogether different in John. The backdrop is the Paschal Feast. The Paschal Feast is mentioned two other times in John's Gospel: before the cleansing of the Temple in Jerusalem by Jesus (2:13), and again after the decision of the Sanhedrin to arrest and do away with Jesus (John 11:55). Our scene today (John 6:1-15) is clearly an introduction to Christ's doctrine on the Holy Eucharist which is gradually expounded over the course of the entire chapter. It serves as an introduction to the Eucharist, as does the miraculous event which immediately follows it, which is Christ's walking on the water to his disciples who are in difficulty. There, amid the "*great wind*" and standing in the midst of the Sea, he declares, "*It is I (ego eimi). Do not be afraid!*". The *ego eimi* (*It is I — I AM*) being reminiscent of God's own holy name given to Moses from the Burning Bush, *I AM*. Jesus is the divine source of the Bread from heaven, given for the life of the world. Over the course of the same chapter, Christ will be extraordinarily explicit in his very public teaching on the true Bread from heaven, which is his own flesh and blood.

All must eat and drink of this if they are to have life everlasting. All this is prefigured by the loaves and fishes.

We see from John's account of this miracle that it was not worked simply as a sign of Christ's divine power. It was a sign of a very great miracle *to come*, with ramifications for every believer till the end of the world. It was a sign of the new Passover, and in particular of the Holy Eucharist. Jesus Christ is mankind's Bread from heaven, but in a very concrete sense. The bread and wine used at the Paschal Feast became, by Christ's power and word, his own Body and Blood. It did not become this symbolically or figuratively, but really so. The whole Person of Jesus Christ replaces the substance of the bread and wine, leaving the appearances alone untouched. As such, he is the life of the world. Let us recognize Jesus Christ, this heavenly Bread, as our life, then!

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Second reflection: (Acts 5:34-42)

Fighting against God Our passage from the Acts of the Apostles (5:34-42) reports the words of Gamaliel who advised that the apostles be let go. He said that if not, the Sanhedrin would be in danger of finding themselves fighting against God. Prescinding from the particular historical context in which these words were uttered, we could ask ourselves if *we* ever find ourselves fighting against God. For the last ten years of his pontificate Pope John Paul II suffered from increasingly debilitating physical conditions which God chose to permit, despite the pivotal ministry and responsibilities which as pope he had to fulfil. He gave a shining example of one who did not fight against God. On the contrary, he submitted humbly, and transformed his crosses into channels of life. In death he drew thousands to God, and his funeral was perhaps the biggest crowd he ever drew. It was the same with his beatification six years later.

Let us never fight against God and his holy will. Let us, if we wish to be disciples of Christ, take up the cross he chooses to give us every day, and follow generously in his footsteps.



Saturday of the Second week of Easter

Entrance Antiphon Cf. 1 Pt 2:9 O chosen people, proclaim the mighty works of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light, alleluia.

Collect Set aside, O Lord, the bond of sentence written for us by the law of sin, which in the Paschal Mystery you cancelled through the Resurrection of Christ your Son. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Or:

O God, who willed that through the paschal mysteries the gates of mercy should stand open for your faithful, look upon us and have mercy, that as we follow, by your gift, the way you desire for us, so may we never stray from the paths of life. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 6:1-7; Psalm 33:1-2, 4-5, 18-19;

John 6:16-21

When evening came the disciples of Jesus went down to the sea, got into a boat and went across for Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come back to them. A strong wind blew and the sea began to stir. They had rowed some twenty five or thirty furlongs when they saw Jesus walking on the sea and approaching the boat. They were afraid, but he said to them: It is I. Do not fear. Then they took him on board willingly enough and very soon the boat reached the shore to which they were going. (John 6:16-21)

Christ the all-powerful One It is a great thing if any planet is discovered to have signs of water on it, whereas the seas are a great feature of planet earth. The earth abounds in water, and its greatest presence is the sea. The sea is a major factor in human history too. There have been various nations over the centuries who have taken to the seas as to their natural element, and have excelled as

naval and trading powers. For a period of its classical past, Athens was especially adept in naval warfare. In the early modern era, Britain was a great naval and trading force. Napoleon attempted to bring it to its knees by cutting off its continental trade. But Britain's dominance of the seas during this conflict crippled him. Other societies have reigned on land. The Mongols roared out of the East on horseback, pillaging, burning, slaying, razing to the ground. Whatever the natural element of a particular society, though, all have had a respect for the inexorable sea — friendly or cruel as it may have been. It has offered inexhaustible supplies of food to man, and has brought waves of death to him as well, a mother and a destroyer both. It is a vast tomb that has engulfed countless lives lost through warfare, sickness and various mishaps occurring on its surface. It has never had a master, except for the God who made and sustains it. No man or society can be said to have power over it. It must be respected or else it will open its mighty jaws and consume its disregarding guests. Various events described in the inspired Scriptures

reflect the might of the sea and the awe it arouses in man. The children of Israel, on their way out of slavery were pursued by their Egyptian oppressors. There they stood on the shores of the Red Sea, and God commanded Moses. He would put the Sea to his service, and the pursuing enemy was overwhelmed. No-one could master the Sea but God its Creator. For the Hebrew, the seas were great and terrible. The Sea of Galilee was a friend to the region's inhabitants, and they were often crossing it and working for their sustenance on it. But it was powerful, and it could bring death.

Our Gospel scene today must have made a profound impression on the disciples of our Lord. Our Lord had just fed the multitude with a handful of food. Doubtless the food, consisting of five barley loaves and two fish, was delicious and entirely satisfying. When our Lord worked the other food miracle, the changing of water into wine (which John also narrates), it was much better wine than anything the guests had consumed to that point. Christ had showed himself to be their Bread of Life, and had given a

sign of a new Passover meal to come. He would be mankind's true food and drink, and would sustain them with a share in his own eternal life. Here again, on the very sea, he shows forth his mighty power. Whoever heard of a man walking on the sea, striding upon it, making his way along upon its surface, in the midst of surging waves and strong wind? Where is there anything such as this in all of the Scriptures? Where is there any such thing in the annals of human history, or in its myths? The nearest thing in religious myths is the pagan god of the sea, the mythical Neptune. But here we have a *real man*, flesh and blood, effortlessly making his way towards his friends amid the haze of spray and waves. There he approached, his figure clearly seen, though not yet recognized. He rose and fell with the moving surface, an apparition striking fear into their awe-struck hearts. It is I. Do not be afraid, he calmly called. Wonderful indeed! How manifest was his awesome power! He was Lord of food and drink, Lord of sickness and disease, Lord over the underworld and the demonic, Lord of life and death, and yes, Lord of the sea. He was

Lord of all things. Yet he had made himself so vulnerable in becoming man like us. He who was God, was thoroughly man. He became man to take upon himself the burden of the sin of the world — and atoning for the sin of the world would be the greatest display of his power. This divine power, so evident in his walking on the sea, would reach its climactic act in his death and resurrection by which he would redeem the world. It would also be especially manifest in that to which his miracle of the loaves had pointed. As Redeemer, he would give his very self to be mankind's food and drink. How powerful is Jesus Christ! He gives himself to us in the Eucharist to be our food for life eternal.

Let us contemplate in our hearts Jesus Christ as he calmly walks on the foaming sea, gazing lovingly at his labouring disciples. There he pauses. There he tells them, *It is I. Do not fear.* I suspect that when Christ boarded the boat, his garments and Person were found not to be drenched but practically dry. Jesus Christ, let us always remember, is almighty, and his might shows itself in

mercy. Let us place our faith in him, and let us be sure never to be separated from him.

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Second reflection: (John 6:16-21)

“It is I. Do not be afraid.” Time and again in life we are faced with storms of various kinds — situations of varied difficulty. This applies to everyone of whatever circumstance or walk of life, Christian or not, believer or not. There must have been many cases of fishermen caught in rough and stormy weather on the lake of Galilee, and perhaps in its long history there had been many drownings and tragedies. But in the case of the disciples there was this difference, that they were friends of Jesus. And so, while they were indeed caught in the rough weather, Jesus himself came to them on the water. Jesus came to be with them in their difficulty. Whatever be our difficulties, our Lord will come to us. He is ever gazing at

us with love and power. We are in the presence of Him who is all-loving, all-powerful. Whatever be the difficulties inherent in the decisions we are called on to make, let us remember that we are in his presence. Let us, then, make our decisions asking for his aid. If vicissitudes assail us, we are always in his presence. He can and will help us, just as he helped his disciples with his presence.

Our greatest difficulty and our greatest challenge is the attainment of holiness. Christ is with us, saying “*It is I. Do not be afraid.*” And just as when he entered the boat, the disciples found themselves near to land, so too, if we trust and obey, Christ will bring us to the goal of our life. He is our strength all the days of our life, in or out of adversity, in seeking the goal of life which is holiness and heaven.



Third Sunday of Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 66 (65):1-2 Cry out with joy to God, all the earth; O sing to the glory of his name. O render him glorious praise, alleluia.

Collect May your people exult for ever, O God, in renewed youthfulness of spirit, so that, rejoicing now in the restored glory of our adoption, we may look forward in confident hope to the rejoicing of the day of resurrection. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 2:14, 22-33; Psalm 16:1-2, 5, 7-11;
Peter 1:17-21; Luke 24:13-35

That very day two of Jesus' disciples were going to a town some seven miles from Jerusalem, named Emmaus. They were discussing all that had happened. It happened that while they talked it over Jesus himself drew near but their eyes were closed to recognizing him. He said to

them: What are you discussing as you walk along, and why so sad? One of them, whose name was Cleophas answered: Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who has not known what has happened here in these last few days? What things, he asked? Concerning, they said, Jesus of Nazareth who was a prophet, mighty in work and word before God and all the people. Our chief priests and leaders delivered him up to death and had him crucified. We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Today is the third day since all this happened. Indeed, certain women in our group astonished us. Before dawn they were at the sepulchre, and not finding his body, came back saying that they had also seen a vision of angels who said he is alive. Some of our people went to the sepulchre and found it as the women had said but of him they found nothing. Then he said to them: You foolish people and slow of heart to believe what the prophets have said. Had not the Messiah to suffer thus and so enter his glory? Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he expounded to them all that referred to him in the scriptures. So they drew near the

town to which they were heading and he made as if to go on. But they prevailed on him saying: Stay with us, because it is towards evening, and the day is now far spent. So he went in with them. And it came to pass while he was at table with them that he took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him. But he vanished from their sight. They said to one another, Were not our hearts burning within us while he spoke on the road and explained to us the scriptures? Rising up there and then they went back to Jerusalem and found the eleven gathered together and those that were staying with them. Yes, they said, the Lord is risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon. They told them of the things that had happened on the road and how they had recognized him in the breaking of the bread. (Luke 24:13-35)

Reverence for the Eucharist

In our Gospel scene of today our Lord joins the two disciples on their way to Emmaus. They do not know it is he, but he accompanies them as they walk and talk along the road.

He forms them by giving them an extended instruction on the meaning of the Scriptures, a long catechesis on what the Old Testament readings teach about himself. Then when at table with them he took bread, said the blessing, broke it and gave it to them. Their eyes were opened and they recognised him. What are we reminded of in all this? We are surely reminded of the presence of our Lord at Mass, which is the summit and source of the Christian life. Christ is at Mass in his full and total reality, speaking to us and instructing us by means of his word, and by his words that change the bread into his body, making present the sacrifice of himself at Calvary. Our Gospel scene reminds us of Jesus present at Mass and in the Tabernacle. It is just as easy to be inadvertent of the real presence of our Lord in the Eucharist as the two disciples were inadvertent of the real presence of the risen Jesus with them on their way to Emmaus. Being advertent of his real presence requires a constant exercise of faith, and the cultivation of a number of practices ensuring a lively faith and personal reverence. To keep before our mind that Christ, the whole Christ, the

risen Christ in all his power, is truly present at Mass and in the Tabernacle, requires a constant effort of faith. This is because we do not see him in his physical form and shape. We see him in another form, the form or appearance of bread and wine. When we enter the church, we do not see our Lord in his human figure. We see a Tabernacle. In fact, we can develop the habit of not even noticing the Tabernacle, in which he is present sacramentally. So we ignore him, not deliberately, but we are still at fault. We do not make the active effort to think and act according to our Catholic faith in the holy Eucharist.

When we enter the church we tend to act and think as if all there is in the church is what we physically see, which is to say the church interior and the people gathered around us. We may enter into some personal prayers, but unless we are on guard, we may just as easily sit down and begin chatting with our neighbour, reading the bulletin, or looking around. Then at the end of Mass, we may find ourselves doing the same before we are yet outside. This is because we tend not to live by faith but by sight. By our

faith we know the real presence of our Lord in the Tabernacle. But if we act only by sight, we will neglect the living risen Jesus, truly present, but out of direct sight, and in any case under the appearance of bread, in the Tabernacle. So too during Mass itself, we are in danger of participating only according to what we physically see and hear. That is to say, we are in danger of participating principally and simply in what we see the congregation doing. Rather, we should strive to participate principally in the action of *Christ*, who is the head of the congregation and of the entire Church. The whole congregation together participates in what they know by faith Christ to be doing. Let us remember this as we are coming to Mass, resolving to be early for Mass so as to have time to recollect ourselves and prepare in a spirit of faith. We ought ask the Holy Spirit during the penitential rite to help us be conscious of our sins and to ask God's pardon, thinking of his mercy. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ is present at Mass in the person of the priest. He speaks to us in his word, in the readings of Scripture and the homily.

Then in the Eucharistic Prayer we should recognize in faith the presence of Jesus who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, transforms the substance of the bread and wine into the substance of his body and blood, and makes present the sacrifice of himself for us at Calvary. He comes to us in Holy Communion, enabling us to unite ourselves to him in his offering of himself to his Father. Thinking actively of this many-sided presence of Christ at Mass and in the Tabernacle, let us resolve also to approach the Sacrament of Penance regularly and frequently so as to be worthy of receiving him.

Out of respect for our Lord, we ought cultivate personal practices that protect within us a deep sense of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. Prayerful silence in the church where our Lord is, reverent genuflections, guarding our eyes and keeping them frequently on the Tabernacle, making the sign of the cross reverently as we enter — making sure in all of this that we have a lively sense of the Eucharistic Jesus. Let us make the Eucharist the source and summit of our entire life.

Further Reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*
no. 1373-1375 [Christ's presence (in the Eucharist) by the
power of his word and the Holy Spirit]



Monday of the Third week of Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon The Good Shepherd has risen, who laid down his life for his sheep and willingly died for his flock, alleluia.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that, putting off our old self with all its ways, we may live as Christ did, for through the healing paschal remedies you have conformed us to his nature. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 6:8-15; Ps 119:23-24, 26-27, 29-30;
John 6:22-29

The next day the crowd that had stayed on the opposite shore of the lake realised that only one boat had been there, and that Jesus had not entered it with his disciples, but that they had gone away alone. Then some boats from Tiberias landed near the place where the people had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. Once the crowd realised that neither Jesus nor his

disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus. When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, Rabbi, when did you get here? Jesus answered, I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval. Then they asked him, What must we do to do the works God requires? Jesus answered, The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent. (John 6:22-29)

The real Christ The Gospel of St John is recognized as being the most “theological” of the Gospels — it gives more space than do the other three on the doctrinal significance of the facts that are narrated. At the same time, the Gospel of St John is strong on facts, even when they are scarcely necessary to the topic in hand. Our Gospel passage today is from the sixth chapter of St John, which is mainly given over to the Holy Eucharist. The

account begins with the miracle of the loaves and fishes, near the time of the Passover feast of the Jews. Jesus is the Bread from Heaven that gives life to the world. It is followed by the crossing back to Capernaum, in which our Lord walks on the Sea of Tiberius to join his disciples in the boat. In prophetic manner he is displaying, as the Bread from heaven, his powerful care for his disciples on their journey to the Promised Land of heaven, as it were. Then there is the encounter of the people with Jesus and his disciples back at Capernaum, and this is the focus of our Gospel passage today. Here, as ever, we notice factual details. John chooses to tell us that at the time of the miracle of the loaves *“only one boat had been there, and that Jesus had not entered it with his disciples, but that they (his disciples) had gone away alone.”* The people, seeing the disciples depart, knew that our Lord was still in their vicinity on the nearby mountain, where they had seen him ascend. But the next day they discover that he was gone. Again, John cares to tell us how a number of the people were able to get across to Capernaum to find Jesus.

It was by means of “*boats from Tiberius*” that “*landed near the place where the people had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks.*” It was not necessary that he tell us this, but he vividly remembers it. He also includes the detail that the next day they asked our Lord how he had got back. Apart from all this, there is another thing which John mentions in this passage — various of Jesus’ titles. He is “*the Lord.*” He is “*Rabbi.*” He is “*the Son of Man.*” He is the One on whom God the Father has set the seal of his approval, the One whom the Father has sent.

The title of “*Lord*” occurs a few times in this chapter. The people address him as “*Lord*” when Christ tells them that the Bread of God is the One who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. “*Lord,*” they said to him, “*give us this bread always*” (John 6:34). As used by them, it is a title of respect for One who can fulfil their longing for life. The same title appears in our passage today, and is here used by the inspired writer himself in his narrative: “*Then some boats from Tiberias landed near the place where the people had eaten the bread after the Lord*

had given thanks” (6:23). It has the full Christian meaning of “*Lord*” — and obviously refers to the personal divinity of Jesus, as expressed by Thomas in John 20:28, “*My Lord and my God!*” It is used again at the end of this chapter on the Eucharist by Simon Peter, when he professes full faith in Jesus Christ: “*Lord, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God*” (6:68-69). The people also address him as “*Rabbi*” (6:25) — a common form of address. We remember that this was the first title with which our Lord was addressed by his disciples when on the threshold of his public ministry (John 1:38, and 1:49). Nathanael, on using this form of address to our Lord, immediately passes to a complete Christian faith: “*Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel*” (1:49) — which is to say, the Messiah, the Christ. It is also the title Mary Magdalene accords Jesus on his rising from the dead (*Rabbouni* — “my Teacher”, the same form of the word used by the blind man in Mark 10:51). In his day, the title of Rabbi may have been the most common of Christ’s titles. He was widely recognized by the people as the most authoritative

teacher of the day. Pilate recognized that it was for *envy* that the Jewish authorities had handed Jesus over to him. He is also “*Son of Man.*” This is used by Christ himself, and the one which our Lord may have used most often, conjuring up the prophecies of Daniel, and avoiding the political expectations of the idea of the “Messiah-King.” Finally, he is the One on whom “*God the Father has placed his seal of approval.*” He is “the one he has sent.” These titles reveal the richness of Christ in our passage.

Jesus Christ — glorious Man, great God! He is our Lord, our Teacher, the Son of Man, the One whom the Father has sent, and on whom he has set his seal of approval. The work of God which we must do, he tells us in our Gospel today (John 6:22-29), is to believe in him whom God has sent. Let us lovingly contemplate his inexhaustible Person amid the historical details John so lovingly provides us. He is the Bread from heaven that gives life to the world. Let us set our eyes on Jesus Christ, and resolve to place our entire faith in him. This the work of God which is to be done in life. Let us do it, then!

Second reflection: (Acts 6:8-15)

Relying on the Holy Spirit When it comes to the doing of good work for God, there will be a pattern. It is that sooner or later there will be difficulties and opposition. This pattern featured above all in the life of Our Lord. It is present in the life of Stephen (Acts 6:8-15). We are told that he “*was filled with grace and power and began to work miracles and great signs among the people.*” He was doing very good work. But great opposition sprang up: “*But then certain people came forward to debate with Stephen,*” and “*they procured some men to say*” falsehoods about him, and “*in this way turned the people against him as well as the elders and scribes.*” Stephen found himself surrounded by difficulties. If we aspire to do good work for God, we too must expect difficulties. But amid the inevitable difficulties we have a great Counsellor and Advocate, the Holy Spirit. Our Lord said to his disciples

that when they were brought before kings and governors because of their doing what was right, they were not to worry. The Holy Spirit would be with them to speak through them. We see all this exemplified in Stephen. He was filled with grace and power — they could not get the better of him, *“because of his wisdom, and because it was the Spirit that prompted what he said.”*

Let us then be always ready for difficulties, if we mean to follow our Lord closely. Let us also live in confidence, for we have the Holy Spirit as our friend and guide. Let us trust him.



Tuesday of the Third week in Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Revelation 19:5; 12:10 Sing praise to our God, all you who fear God, both small and great, for now salvation and strength have come, and the power of his Christ, alleluia.

Collect O God, who open wide the gates of the heavenly Kingdom to those reborn of water and the Holy Spirit, pour out on your servants an increase of the grace you have bestowed, that, having been purged of all sins, they may lack nothing that in your kindness you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 7:51-8:1a; Psalm 31:3cd-4, 6 & 7b & 8a, 17 & 21ab; John 6:30-35

So they asked Jesus, What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: 'He

gave them bread from heaven to eat.’ Jesus said to them, I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. Sir, they said, from now on give us this bread. Then Jesus declared, I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. (John 6:30-35)

Manna from God One of the most interesting of disciplines is archaeology, and for the past century and a half it has been flourishing. It has also polarized opinions in respect to Old Testament history, with some saying that archaeology has demonstrated that such great events as the Exodus, the long sojourn in the wilderness and the taking of Palestine never happened. Where is the *external evidence* for Abraham, the patriarchs including Joseph in Egypt, Moses, David, any of the great prophets? On this, it seems, archaeology is largely silent. Others have mounted a vigorous support for the historicity of the great Old

Testament events by making surprising use of the little extrinsic evidence available. For instance, some have pointed to the parallels between the Old Testament account of the plagues, and the Ipuwer Papyrus of Leiden 344. Many claim this papyrus was written by an Egyptian named Ipuwer, and that it looks very like an eyewitness account of the effects of the Exodus plagues from the perspective of an average Egyptian. Let us not enter into such matters here. I would only say that I find it inconceivable, humanly speaking, that the powerful tradition concerning the great historical events of the Old Testament was, basically, fantasy. The sheer weight of the Hebrew tradition and memory is powerful internal evidence for its historical character, whatever might be said of various details. There is a further consideration for the Christian. Jesus Christ himself refers to various persons and events as if they actually happened. For instance, one such was the gift from God of the Manna in the desert to the children of Israel as they made their way in the wilderness. What would *Christ* have said if it had been

claimed in conversation with him that there never was a Moses, nor an Exodus, nor the Manna in the desert? Moses and Elijah actually appeared with him in glory at the Transfiguration, conversing with him. That is not to say that Inspiration requires us to accept as historical (in the modern sense of the word) the full presentation of the past in the Old Testament texts, in all its pictorial detail. It used to be thought that the doctrine of inspiration required of us that we take creation as having been effected over six days because that is how creation is presented in Genesis 1. The advance of science and textual criticism has showed that this interpretation of the first page of Genesis is misconceived — its purpose is not simply scientific.

Let us consider for a moment God's feeding of his people with Manna in the desert. We read that God kept his people going with plain food — manna and quail. In the event, very many people got tired of it. It lacked variety. Back in Egypt they had had melons and a variety of food from the well-irrigated soil of the land there. They wanted a tastier spread from God, and their grumbling

risked a serious punishment. I myself think that such details as this provide even more internal evidence of the plausibility of the account. Be that as it may, the manna was a great sign of God's power on behalf of his people. It was always remembered as such. God could carry them through all their trials. It was "*bread from heaven.*" In our Gospel today the people, having already seen our Lord's miracle of the loaves and fishes, demand an even greater sign from heaven as proof of his claims. He had said that the one thing they must do was believe in him. This is the work of God, he had said, that you *believe in the one he has sent*. So they said, *what sign can you do*, a sign that we can see, that will induce us to believe in you? "*Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'*" Not only did this sign preserve the people's faith in God, but it kept alive their faith in Moses as God's appointed servant. What sign can you do? Our Lord then gives the true meaning of the manna in the desert. It was not the true bread that God would give from heaven. It always failed, and in any case

it did not preserve from death. There is a truer bread from heaven, and it will give life to all, not just to the children of Israel. *“Jesus said to them, I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”* A far more wondrous Bread from God is coming, and He, Jesus, is that Bread. *“Sir, they said, from now on give us this bread. Then Jesus declared, I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty”* (John 6:30-35).

Let us learn to read the Gospels within the context of the entire Scriptures. The summit of the Scriptures is to be found in the Gospels because they present the Person and teaching of Jesus Christ most directly. Our passage today is from a central chapter in the Gospel of St John. It speaks of the Holy Eucharist, which is none other than the full human and divine reality of Jesus Christ. Let us look on

him as our heavenly Bread. He will give us life everlasting both now and hereafter.

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Second reflection: (Acts 7:51-8:1)

Being led by the Spirit In the scene before us involving Stephen, we have two classes of persons — there is Stephen, and there are those who wish to be rid of him. Stephen, we are told, was “*filled with the Holy Spirit.*” In this description of Stephen, we think of our Lord himself, who was so utterly filled with the Holy Spirit. We think also of our Lady who is full of grace, and upon whom the Holy Spirit had come. We think of St John the Baptist who received the Holy Spirit while still in his mother’s womb. Stephen, in other words, is in the company of those to whom the Holy Spirit had come, and by whose grace he was testifying to Christ in our passage today. On the other side there is a very different company — those whom

Stephen (speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) said were stubbornly resisting the Holy Spirit. They had a long ancestry, and their ancestors persecuted the prophets. They now resisted the good news of Christ and proceeded to put St Stephen to death.

Let us resolve to take the side of those who strive to be led by the Holy Spirit. He will lead us from within our consciences and our consciences must be guided by the word of Christ as proclaimed and enunciated by the Church.



Wednesday of the Third week in Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 71 (70):8, 23 Let my mouth be filled with your praise, that I may sing aloud; my lips shall shout for joy, when I sing to you, alleluia.

Collect Be present to your family, O Lord, we pray, and graciously ensure those you have endowed with the grace of faith an eternal share in the Resurrection of your Only Begotten Son. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 8:1b-8; Psalm 66:1-7a; John 6:35-40

Then Jesus declared, I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all

that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. (John 6:35-40)

Eternal life We are able in our minds to distinguish the *existence* of something from the *kind* of thing it is. We can think of a man who does not exist, and one who does. The former may be regarded as a *possibility* contemplated by the mind, the latter is an actuality perceived by the senses. So, formally speaking, his existence is distinguishable from his kind or nature. That having been said, one would think that if something does in fact exist, its existence would give to it a certain necessity. After all, what is there intrinsic to the notion of something existing that could interfere with its existence? Why should, say, its duration be limited if it is endowed with existence? Well, of course, there would be nothing to limit its duration, nor any other feature of its existence, were it the very essence of that thing to exist. But the world and the things of our experience cannot be simply identified

with their existence, if only for the simple fact that, in fact, they plainly need not exist. Their existence is limited or qualified by various features of the kind of limited thing they are. Their nature does not require existence, rather existence happens to be theirs, as given to them from without. A new-born child has *received* and now possesses its existence. So instead of being inherently necessary, as things would be were it of their essence to exist, they are inherently contingent. Ultimately, were it not for the sustaining hand of their loving Creator, existence would never be theirs. The limited things of our direct experience have no necessary hold on existence, as they would were it of their essence to exist. They are vulnerable to decline, mutation, exhaustion and demise. We know from divine revelation that the existence and life granted to us by our loving Creator will never be revoked. But it will mutate — for better or worse as the case may be. Importantly, at the heart of this radical possibility of mutation lies the moral decision. If a person chooses to do what is right, he flourishes in his being. If he chooses amiss in a moral

sense, he will wither and even die. What this means is that the great issue ahead of every man and woman is life or death, flourishing or decline, according as he chooses the good or chooses the bad. God has revealed that at the very end each human being will either enjoy the fullness of life, or unending death — and this, the result of his choices.

It is to be life or death, then — so we must choose life! Broadly this is the loud and clear message of Moses, the Psalms and the Prophets — in other words, of the Old Testament Scriptures. Now Christ has told us far more of the Afterlife than any Old Testament teacher or prophet. In his parable of the Rich Man and the Poor Man Lazarus, immediately after death Lazarus is taken to the bosom of Abraham, while the Rich Man is buried in Hell. So there is an instant judgment following death, and the ultimate issues for each man or woman take effect — though we know also that for the just there is the blessing of a purification before their full flourishing in Heaven. Christ also made it clear that there will be a Day at the end when he will come to judge the living and the dead. He will raise

up the just in their full bodily persons to be with him forever, and the unjust will go to Hell. As has been said, the critical thing on which everything will turn will be the moral choices of each person during life. The experience of a flourishing of his being consequent on good moral choices in this life will be a harbinger of the much greater flourishing in the life to come, following the judgment of Christ. The degradation and decline consequent on bad moral choices in this life will likewise be a harbinger of what is to come, everlasting Hell. Much of this we might dimly guess at by the light of natural reason and the conscience, but there is one thing which has been revealed and which we could never divine were it not for Christ's word. I am referring to faith in Jesus Christ *as the key to all*. Faith in him is the path and the gateway to holiness and heaven. Our Lord directly alludes to this in our Gospel passage today: *"this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal*

life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:35-40).

The answer to the radical contingency of man, and to the threat to him which sin constitutes, is to look to Jesus Christ our Lord and believe in him. If our whole life is characterized by this course, we shall be raised up by him at the end.

Let us be very aware of the awful possibilities ahead of each of us. We happen to possess life and existence, but this need not be. That we do exist, is a gift, a blessing bestowed upon us from on high. Existing as we do, we can nevertheless turn out very, very badly — or we can reach the heights and flourish. It will all depend on our moral choices. It has been revealed to us that at the heart of the moral life is the Person of Jesus Christ. We must look on him and believe in him — and the test of this is whether we resolve to do what he commands. That is supremely what it means to be moral, and so to flourish and live. Choose Jesus Christ, then, and life will be yours!

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Second reflection: (John 6:35-40)

Love is the key I remember watching an interview with the famous producer of nature films, Richard Attenborough. He was responding to a question as to whether his observation of nature helped him believe in God. He said that, on the contrary, the savagery that he observed in the animal kingdom posed a problem for him as to the character, and therefore the existence, of God. Animals are killers of one another. The death of one serves to sustain the life of another. How could a moral God create this cruel state of affairs? But Attenborough should have looked at it from a different perspective. This pattern in which the life of one is taken to sustain the life of another is surely a *faint reflection* of a much *higher* pattern. I refer to high and noble self-sacrificing love, in which one's life is freely sacrificed for another. Christ is the embodiment of this, and in this he reveals the life of the Godhead. In our passage today (John 6:35-40) our Lord

describes himself as the bread of life. He is bread given for our sake, bringing us life. In the Eucharist he makes himself available to be consumed by us so that we might live with an abundant life. Our Lord's whole life is given over for us in his death. Whoever comes to him will be safe, and his intent is that none of us be lost.

We should never lose our confidence and trust in the total love of Christ for us. He has given himself over for us especially in the Eucharist, so that we may live. Let us steep our entire being prayerfully in this fundamental reality. It is the key to the meaning of life and the universe.



Thursday of the Third week in Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ex 15:1-2 Let us sing to the Lord, for he has gloriously triumphed. The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation, alleluia.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, let us feel your compassion more readily during these days when, by your gift, we have known it more fully, so that those you have freed from the darkness of error may cling more firmly to the teachings of your truth. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 66:8-9, 16-17, 20;
John 6:44-51

Jesus said, No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God.' Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me. No one has seen the Father except

the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father. I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life. I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. (John 6: 44-51)

The answer to death I remember seeing a movie on television years ago, and one scene showed a mother and her young child. The child suddenly asked his mother, *Why isn't there nothing?* The mother looked perplexed, as if she scarcely understood the question. Why isn't there nothing? That question is rarely asked, but it is one of the most fundamental questions about the universe. There are many who would assume that, though the universe obviously changes, in some form it *has* to be. I clearly remember, when I was just beginning secondary school (just turned 12), how I read in my science text-book

that *matter can neither be created nor destroyed*. It struck me very much, and I have never forgotten the statement. As far as science is concerned, as far as observation and physical experiment is concerned, though various objects such as, say, furniture and buildings, can be “made,” *matter* itself cannot be created nor eliminated. Though a chair can be destroyed (say, by fire), *matter* itself cannot be destroyed. That’s what science can state. At most matter can be *changed* beyond recognition. But that child was introducing a question that was beyond the province of science. Why is there not *nothing*, instead of there being matter and the universe? I cannot see how any branch of science, based on observation and experiment, could answer this. It must be left to the best efforts of philosophy, and above all to Revelation. But there is another fundamental question and it is related to our Gospel today. It is this: Why must all living things *die*, including and especially *man*? Why is there not just a flourishing of life? Why is there not a complete absence of death? In fact, death is everywhere — death and

destruction, pain and loss, and with it fear and flight. One of the most notable things about the universe is its change and transitory character, and ultimately this change and transitoriness seems to be ordered to death. The plant appears, it produces its flower, but then it declines and dies. In this sense a great sigh is heard across the face of the universe: What a pity! How sad! If only...! It is normal to rejoice in being, in existing, in living. But it is also normal to long for an escape from that common lot of existence, which is death. Where and what is the answer to death?

The answer to the first question has come — why isn't there nothing? *God chose* to create, and he so chose because of *his love*. The answer to the second question has also come — what is the reason for death? Death, it has been revealed to us, is *due to the Original Sin of man*. Death shows how awful sin is, that it could so devastate the world. The world is far gone in its ruins, and this is its inveterate condition. Were we not to have the benefit of Revelation, we might have the strong hunch that we would

persist after death in some sense, but who could prove the truth of this presentiment? Ultimately we would not know. What we do know from ordinary observation is that at the end of a useful life we lie in death. It is all over for us. So what is there to indicate that this is not the ultimate condition of man? Man's body has not simply disappeared with death (it is reducing to dust in the grave). Well, perhaps in like manner his spirit may not have disappeared at death — but it may be little more than dormant, shadowy, cut off in darkness, unknowing of what is external to itself. In other words, the spirit of man may, after death (for all we naturally know), be somewhat of a reflection or extension of the body that lies in death. It may be radically incapacitated, and forever sunk in an inactive oblivion — somewhat as the body is, though of course the body falls to utter dust. This we might be led to think were it not for Revelation, and certainly the opinions of mankind outside Revealed Religion are most varied as to the Hereafter. Some have a high image of the Afterlife, many others a very dim image. The important thing,

though, is that God has revealed to us what and where the answer to death is. Where and what is the answer to death? God so loved the world that he sent his only Son. The answer to death is the Person of Jesus Christ, and he is found above all in the Church which is his creation. So it is that our Lord makes claims that are unique to him. No prophet before him made such breathtaking personal promises. *“I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life. I am the bread of life.”* Again, *“Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever”* (John 6:44-51).

There is a way out for fallen man, and Jesus Christ firmly, clearly and unhesitatingly proclaimed it. The way out is to *believe in him*. He will give everlasting life to the one who comes to him and places his faith in him — but of course, this faith must not be dead. It must be alive, showing itself in the doing of what God commands. *Good*

Master, the rich young man said, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Keep God's commandments, Christ replied — and added, if you wish to be perfect, sell all and follow me. The only way to the Father is through Jesus Christ. Let us follow that great path then, and let us never stray from him.

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Second reflection: (Acts 8:26-40)

The Holy Spirit the Evangelizer In the Gospels there are various references to the action of the Holy Spirit. Our Lord is led by the Spirit into the desert at the start of his public ministry, there to be tempted by the devil. There are many other references to the Holy Spirit in the Gospels. In The Acts of the Apostles we read of his direct action on the infant Church, inspiring and guiding her members to bring the gospel of Christ to others. One such instance is described in our reading from The Acts today (8:26-40). The Holy Spirit tells Philip to go up and meet the chariot in

which the Ethiopian is travelling, while reading the Scriptures. Then he takes Philip away to yet another opportunity to preach the good news. The Holy Spirit is the great leader and inspirer of evangelization in the Church.

We have been given the gift of this same Holy Spirit. Inasmuch as we have been given a share in the Church's mission to bring Christ to the world, we ought look to the Holy Spirit, our great friend and guide, to inspire and guide us in this daily call. Let us pray to be open to his action!



Friday of the Third week in Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Rev 5:12 Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and divinity, and wisdom and strength and honour, alleluia.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that we, who have come to know the grace of the Lord's Resurrection, may, through the love of the Spirit, ourselves rise to newness of life. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 9:1-20; Psalm 117:1bc, 2;

John 6:52-59

Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, How can this man give us his flesh to eat? Jesus said to them, I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my

flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live for ever. He said this while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum. (John 6:52-59)

Body of Christ The public announcement of the doctrine of the Eucharist in the synagogue of Capernaum is one of the most remarkable religious announcements in the history of mankind. Let us take any of the great statements of the prophets in the Scriptures prior to Jesus Christ. There is the promise of God to Abraham that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. There is the prophecy of Jacob to his son Judah — the sceptre shall never depart from him until he comes to whom it belongs (according to one reading). There is the remarkable revelation of God to Moses on Mount Sinai, the prophecy accorded to David about his dynasty, the statements of

Deutero-Isaiah about the Suffering Servant, the vision of Daniel about the Son of Man — and so we could go on and on. But whoever heard of a prophet, however great, solemnly stating that *his flesh must be eaten and his blood drunk*? While by hindsight the Eucharist had its great types in the Paschal Lamb and the blood of the Covenant, it is a doctrine very new on the scene of divine revelation. More broadly, any suggestion that, say, Zarathustra, Confucius, Buddha, Mahomet, or any other real person of history and not merely of myth would say such a thing in all seriousness would boggle the mind. Imagine anything like this having been said by a serious figure of history — it would immediately have been interpreted as something purely symbolic. There is nothing directly parallel to the proclamation of the doctrine of the Eucharist in the history of revealed religion, nor, I believe, in the religions of the world founded by identifiable figures of history. Prescinding from the divine authority of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, this doctrine is remarkable for its uniqueness, and were it not for the utterly compelling standing of Jesus

of Nazareth, it would be dismissed as ridiculous. But John in his Gospel makes it abundantly clear that our Lord deliberately, with great emphasis, and with repetition, publicly told the assembled people in the Synagogue of his town of Capernaum, a congregation that included many of his disciples, that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood if they were to live.

The result was that there was a walk-out, and our Lord lost many of his disciples. Our Lord foresaw it, and did not hasten to “clarify” his meaning. Let us remember that the three Synoptic Gospels show how careful our Lord was to avoid claims and titles which, though deeply Scriptural (such as the title of Messiah), would be easily misunderstood. The revelation of his true identity was gradual. The Gospel of St John throws extra light on this picture drawn by the Synoptics. In St John’s Gospel, our Lord is shown directly claiming the Messiahship (as before the woman at Jacob’s Well), and that he was divine (as before the religious leaders themselves): *I and the Father are one*, and, *Before Abraham was, I am*. The pattern is

that when there is no possibility of being misunderstood, a point is reached when our Lord is clear. Such is the case with his pronouncement in our Gospel passage today (John 6:52-59). *“My flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me.”* He was understood quite clearly, and many left him. But his doctrine stood, and he expected his disciples to accept it if they wanted to remain with him. We read at the end of this episode (John 6:70) that Christ referred to Judas as a “devil” — he did not accept the doctrine, but he remained in our Lord’s company. He was there, but he had set his face against our Lord. This doctrine was not merely told to his disciples in the privacy of the Last Supper, accompanied by the command to do it in memory of him thereafter. It was publicly announced before the world — and then effected at the Last Supper. There was no mistake about it, and from the earliest days of the infant Church this remarkable and unique doctrine

was acted on and made the heart and soul of the life of the Christian community. The Eucharist was the direct path to union with Jesus Christ and thereby with the Father, and the ongoing means of sharing in the life of God. It is the continuing miracle of the Christian religion, and is the wonder of the ages.

At the Last Supper our Lord showed that his body and blood in its *physical dimensions and form* would not, of course, be consumed (physically). Christ would be consumed *sacramentally*, under the appearances of bread and wine. But this was not explained in the Synagogue of Capernaum. Perhaps this was precisely because our Lord did not want to be misunderstood. That is to say, if he had explained that all this would be done *sacramentally*, it may have been widely thought he meant the whole thing to be a purely *symbolic* action. But no. The Christian religion, which was to be the fulfilment of all that God had revealed to that point, involved the consumption of God the Son made man. By the devout and faith-filled consumption of Jesus Christ (in sacramental mode), God would transform

man. In this way a stupendous union would be effected between God and man. It was for real. How it would be done was still to be revealed — and this would come at the Last Supper. Let us rejoice in all that God has done for us! The Eucharist is a harbinger of heaven, and no eye has seen all that God has in store for us.



Saturday of the Third week in Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Col 2:12 You have been buried with Christ in Baptism, through which you also rose again by faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead, alleluia.

Collect O God, who in the font of Baptism have made new those who believe in you, keep safe those reborn in Christ, that, defeating every onslaught of error, they may faithfully preserve the grace of your blessing. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts of the Apostles 9:31-42; Psalm 115;
John 6:60-69

On hearing Jesus' teaching, many of his disciples said, This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it? Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, Does this offend you? What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! The Spirit gives life; the

flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life. Yet there are some of you who do not believe. For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. He went on to say, This is why I told you that no-one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him. From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. You do not want to leave too, do you? Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God. (John 6:60-69)

Faith The world abounds with religions — perhaps now less so than has been typical for humanity, but there is still plenty of religion. Just how authentically *religious* the religions of the world are is a further question, but it is no surprise that “religious studies” is an important component of secular education. One can study religion at university all over the world, and this is because it is the most natural thing in the world to have a religion and to *be*

religious at least to a point. In the sweep of human history it is unusual to be religiously agnostic, let alone atheistic. Now, it is obvious that religion involves the act and habit of faith. What this means is that the masses of religious persons accept the word of their religious teachers, or the word of their religious culture and society, and think accordingly. Their lives are shaped according to their thinking, and this is shaped and supported by the same general thinking of the population which has accepted the word of its teachers on the unseen realm. There is no doubt about it — mankind lives especially by *faith*. I do not mean that man lives especially by religious faith, but certainly religious faith is an important form of faith in the life of man. The atheist lives by faith too, even though he might think that he lives only by reason. In fact, he operates a lot on faith in everyday life. He believes his wife, he believes the driver of his bus, train or taxi, he believes his dentist and his doctor, he believes his car mechanic, and, indeed, he believes in his atheism. Faith is everywhere and is operating continually in the life of man

— together with personal reason. Faith is especially, though not exclusively, operating in religion. But just as natural faith is at work when a person gets on his bus *believing* that the driver will not deceive him, so natural faith is at work in a lot of religion. The young Hindu or Muslim *naturally* believes his religious parents, teachers and authorities, and continues to believe, *naturally*, what he was taught because the religion he was taught makes sense of things and seems to him to be quite reasonable. So he believes in the unseen. But the foundation of it is a quite natural faith — that is, a faith based on and involving natural factors. I suspect that the majority of religious tenets, including those of Islam, are within the capacity of the human reason to grasp. The faith that is involved in such religions is what I would classify as a natural faith.

Now, *to a point*, faith in Revealed Religion was a natural faith. We read in the Book of Genesis that “*the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless*

you, and make your name a blessing ...and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.’ So Abram went as the Lord had told him” (12: 1-3). Abram, we read, “believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness” (15:6). Was this belief in the Lord a special divine gift, which is to say beyond the natural capacity of his mind and heart? I see no reason to think so: there was nothing in the promise made to him by the Lord that was beyond the capacity of his reason. God had made himself known to him, had spoken to him and had promised numerous descendants, and crowned it all by promising that by him the world would be blessed. This was a wonderful revelation, but not beyond the mind of man to accept. Or again, when God spoke to Moses from the Burning Bush at Horeb, he identified himself as “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.” He was now sending Moses on a mission because he felt for the sufferings of his people. “Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt” (Exodus 3:1-12). Moses accepted the

word of the Lord, and set forth back for Egypt with his wife and sons. The *faith* that he had does not seem to me to have been beyond the power of human reason, as such. It was a truly noble, reasonable and fine response to the word of God to him and apprehended by him, but one within the natural capacity of the human spirit. *To a point*, faith in Revealed Religion is and can be a natural gift – sustained by the Creator, obviously, but not essentially a divine or supernatural endowment. But such is not the case *beyond* that natural point. To believe in Jesus Christ and to accept his word *in its fullness*, requires more than the natural power of the mind and heart of man. With Christ, God must provide the gift of enabling faith. All of this brings us to our Gospel passage today (John 6: 60-69), in which our Lord says quite explicitly that “*The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life*”, and that “*no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him.*”

A point is reached in divine Revelation when man must be enabled from on high if he is to accept the word of

God heartily and truly. He needs a special gift to accept *what is beyond his power to understand*. This point is especially reached in the revelation that comes in Jesus Christ. *He who sees me, sees the Father*. Again, *I and the Father are one*. Or again, *No-one comes to the Father but by me*. Again, *If you do not eat my flesh and drink my blood, you will not have life in you*. The revelation of the mystery of the one, triune God, the Incarnation, and the Atonement by means of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ — these are some of the truths requiring a divine gift of faith. It is this divine gift, beyond but completing the natural tendency of man to believe on good authority, that comes with Baptism. This faith is the foundation of sanctity and of life with God hereafter.

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Second reflection (Acts 9:31-42)

Times of peace We are told that after the conversion of St Paul, the churches of “*Judaea, Galilee and Samaria* were now left in peace, building themselves up in the fear

of the Lord, and filled with the consolation of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 9:31). This provides an important lesson for us. It surely means that when we not having to contend with unusual difficulties, that is the time to be especially active in building up our spiritual life. We are, as it were, on a plateau enabling us to make real progress. In a country where normally there is peace, there is a wonderful opportunity that is squandered by so many. Consider the practice of faith in such a country. The danger is that times of peace can be turned to times when we forget God. When difficulties come, they should be occasions to turn to God alone as our true support. But it will not be easy, and at that point our past fidelity or infidelity will count. There are many who at the end of their lives seem scarcely able to bring themselves to turn to God at their moment of greatest difficulty.

Let us take our cue from our passage in the Acts of the Apostles. Let us use our good times well.



Fourth Sunday of Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 33 (32):5-6 The merciful love of the Lord fills the earth; by the word of the Lord the heavens were made, alleluia.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, lead us to a share in the joys of heaven, so that the humble flock may reach where the brave Shepherd has gone before. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Psalm 23: 1-6;
1 Peter 2:20b-25; John 10:1-10

“Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them,

and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice." Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them. Therefore Jesus said again, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (John 10:1-10)

The Gate There is a point to be noticed in our Lord's parable of the Gate of the Sheepfold. The parable is directed at the Pharisees who were opposing our Lord's authority to lead the people. Pilate would see that it was because of envy that the religious leaders handed Jesus over to him. They profoundly hated the recognition he was receiving from the people. The people were following his voice, and there was no one among the leaders — meaning

above all the Temple aristocracy and authorities — who could in the slightest degree compete with him in religious standing or influence. Christ's authority over the people was not based on position or office, but on sheer personal quality and supernatural power. Christ displayed power over the elements such as storms at sea, over the demons, over sickness and death, and over such natural threats as hunger — he fed vast crowds. There is one point about this perceived authority of Christ which ought be noted. Although his power was *manifest*, it did not *cower* the religious leaders. They were repeatedly silenced in debate with him and could never get the better of him in direct confrontation. But they never seemed to feel *personally threatened* by Christ's manifest supernatural power. This indicates, surely, that in everything our Lord did, it was clear that he never intended to exercise his powers aggressively in his own defence. In respect to his own person he was meek and humble (though indomitable in respect to the truth). When they picked up stones with which to stone him, he appealed to Scripture and to reason,

and then eluded them. He did not, let us say, defend himself by disabling them by imposing on them a physical paralysis. It seems to me that despite seeing his authority and his power, this fact emboldened his enemies to be implacable in their intention to do away with this threat to their religious position. So our Lord was faced with this constant resistance to his claim to being the only way to the Father. *No one comes to the Father except through me* — which is to say, *I am the Gate for the sheep*. As Peter would say before the Sanhedrin after the Ascension of our Lord to heaven, *there is no other name by which men can be saved*. But the religious leaders had set themselves absolutely against this doctrine. They refused to shepherd the people *through this Gate*.

In the parable, the sheep recognize the voice of the one who enters by the Gate. The Gate is Jesus Christ. The true sheep of God, his chosen flock, are able to recognize the true shepherd, which is to say the one who comes truly in the name of Christ and who approaches them through him and by his mandate. *“The gatekeeper opens the gate*

for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice" (John 10:1-10). The sheep follow him because they know his voice. They do not recognize the voice of a stranger, that is to say, one who does not himself recognize the authority of Christ to save and to sanctify, one who does not come to them by his appointment. There is something in the sheep that equips them for this recognition. What is this, this capacity in them to recognize their true shepherds? Let us not push this point so far as to think that the sheep cannot be deceived, for our Lord elsewhere warns against those who will come claiming that '*I am he,*' and St Paul in his letters often warns against those who will enter the flock and deceive the faithful. Nevertheless, in our Gospel passage our Lord clearly points to the capacity of the flock of God to see who is their true shepherd, and

who comes through the Gate, which is to say, who comes with a divine mandate to lead them to their pastures. They have this power of discerning their true pastors by a gift of grace which embeds itself, as it were, in a right moral disposition. If a person is trying to be morally good, if a person is living according to his conscience in a morally prudent and enlightened fashion, then that person is good soil for the reception of the seed coming from the hand of God. The seed will be the word of God accompanied by divine grace. That person, living by his conscience and spiritually enabled by the grace and word of God, will be thereby empowered to recognize who it is he should follow. He will know the voice of the Shepherd.

Let us ask God for the grace to be true to our best selves day by day — which is to say, to the light of conscience, that power implanted in us to determine what it is that we should do. On the basis of upright living, sustained by the grace of God and a right conscience, let us be faithful to those pastors of Christ's church who are properly mandated to lead us to heaven in Jesus Christ. It

is those who pass through the Gate, which is Jesus Christ and his mystical body the Church, who are the ones we ought follow. Let us make sure we are led to him who is the only way to the Father.



Monday of the Fourth week of Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Rom 6:9 Christ, having risen from the dead, dies now no more; death will no longer have dominion over him, alleluia.

Collect O God, perfect light of the blessed, by whose gift we celebrate the paschal mysteries on earth, bring us, we pray, to rejoice in the full measure of your grace for ages unending. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 42:2-3; 43:3, 4;
John 10:11-18

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me-just as the Father knows me and I know the Father- and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life - only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father. (John 10:11-18)

Good Shepherd In his discussion of the assent that is involved in religious faith (*A Grammar of Assent*, 1870), Saint John Henry Newman stressed the religious imagination as a medium of religious worship, prayer, and life. The life of religion is not just a *rational* process and conclusion (though it includes these), but involves also an *image* of a Person. That *image* of God in the heart of an individual or a people is treasured and nourished from a variety of sources, including the conscience and the devout

reading of the Scriptures, especially the Gospels. Prescinding from the Christian religion, we see the power of images in the religious life of primal religions and the classical pagan religions of Greece and Rome. Myth abounds, and it serves a variety of functions. The religions of Greece and Rome were replete with myth — all products of the imagination, expressing deeper perceptions of the religious mind. The case is the same with traditional primal societies. When we turn to revealed religion, the religion expressed in the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, there too *images* pervade what we read. Images are a principal medium of divine revelation, and this reaches its high point in the numerous parables devised and told by the Son of God made man. Christ's parables are all images. They strike the imagination, while expressing the profoundest of truths upon which the reason of man may exercise itself across the ages. Let us take one image that is famous in the Christian and Jewish imagination. It is that which our Lord employs in today's Gospel. In the passage before this one (that is, John 10: 1-10), our Lord has described himself as

the Door of the Sheepfold. All true shepherds must enter through him, and lead the sheep out through him, if they are to attain their pasture. Then the image changes. *“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep”* (John 10:11). At the time of our Lord’s use of the image of the Good Shepherd, it was a hallowed one with a history spanning many centuries. Hence it was powerful and full of significance, and bears prayerful contemplation in the light of the Scriptures.

One of the most well-known of the psalms extols God as the individual’s personal shepherd. In Psalm 23, *“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want!”* Each sheep has full confidence in its shepherd. *“In green pastures he gives me repose. Beside restful waters he leads me, he refreshes my soul.”* This image expresses in singular fashion the faith of Israel in God’s particular providence — his tender care not just for his chosen people, but for each individual member of this people. We recall Christ’s portrayal of the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine in the wilderness and goes after the stray — the point being the care of the shepherd of the

individual sheep. This is repeated in Deutero-Isaiah, where God is portrayed: “*like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs, carrying them in his bosom and leading the ewes with care*” (Isaiah 40:11). Of course, God exercised this caring rule through earthly “shepherds.” Moses asked the Lord to appoint a leader so that “*the Lord’s community may not be like sheep without a shepherd.*” And so the Lord asked Moses to lay his hand on Joshua (Numbers 27:17-18). David, who had been a shepherd in Bethlehem, was anointed king of Israel. He had been told by the Lord that he would “*shepherd my people Israel*” (2 Samuel 5:2). But as it turned out, the shepherds of Israel failed. Speaking as prophet of God, Ezekiel condemned the shepherds of Israel. A woe was pronounced on them, and God promised he would claim his sheep from them. He would save them himself. He himself would tend the sheep, and would lead them to pasture upon the mountains of Israel. The image of God as shepherd of his people and of each member of his people was long a hallowed one. Further, God promises to judge

between his sheep and the goats (34:17), and we see the promise of the fulfilment of this in Matthew 25, when our Lord describes the final Judgment. At the end he will separate the sheep from the goats. Most importantly, Ezekiel prophesies the appointment by God of *“one shepherd over them to pasture them, my servant David; he shall pasture them and be their shepherd”* (Ezekiel 34:23).

In Jesus Christ, God has intervened to be the Shepherd of his people in person. His Son has come to lead the people to pasture, and each sheep is known, loved and cared for. So great is the care, that our Good Shepherd lays down his very life for his sheep. *“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father — and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd”* (John 10: 11-18). These are powerful images, selected and employed by God himself, speaking through

the prophets and finally through his divine Son our Redeemer. Let us treasure them!

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Second reflection: (John 10:11-18)

Our Lord's love for his flock Long and prayerful meditation on the Gospel enables us to know the heart of Christ, and this knowledge is the basis of our love for him. It is especially the Gospel of St John, the "*beloved disciple*," that reveals the heart of Christ. It is a heart of boundless love. Our Lord, in describing himself, draws from both the life of his hearers and the Scriptures. A special bond existed between the shepherd and his sheep. We remember how the angels announced the birth of the Messiah to shepherds who were guarding their sheep by night. In the Scriptures, God is the Good Shepherd who guards his sheep, and who will raise up one to shepherd his

sheep. Christ is that Shepherd. He is the embodiment of God who is the Shepherd of his people.

Our Lord loves his sheep to the point of laying down his life for them, and this is what he has done for each of us, whom he knows by name. The Father loves the Son for this — and he will love us too if we strive to be like Jesus in our love for one another.



Tuesday of the Fourth week in Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Rev 19:7, 6 Let us rejoice and be glad and give glory to God, for the Lord our God the Almighty reigns, alleluia.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that, celebrating the mysteries of the Lord's Resurrection, we may merit to receive the joy of our redemption. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 11:19-26; Psalm 87:1b 7;

John 10:22-30

Then came the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon's Colonnade. The Jews gathered round him, saying, How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly. Jesus answered, I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are

not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one. (John 10:22-30)

Christ's sheep Our scene is in Jerusalem, and it is the great Temple — one of the best buildings in the world of that time. In a sense, Herod's Temple was the talk of the Roman world when it came to buildings, and its destruction by Titus in 70 AD was a tremendous event. So there Jesus was, and he was in the Colonnade of Solomon. The Jewish historian Josephus describes the Colonnade: *“All the cloisters were double, and the pillars supporting them were twenty five cubits in height. These pillars were of one entire stone each of them, and that stone was white marble; and the roofs were adorned with cedar, curiously graven. The natural magnificence, and excellent polish, and the harmony of the joints in these cloisters, afforded a prospect that was very remarkable.....” (Jewish Wars 5. 5.*

2). The Colonnade provided a long and straight walk under some shelter, and being winter, Jesus was walking — perhaps briskly with some of his disciples in order to keep warm. We can imagine the friendly atmosphere among the group, our Lord in the centre, the others walking with him on either side. Perhaps they were chatting about light matters, perhaps our Lord was giving special instruction to his disciples. We can imagine ripples of laughter and the murmur of talk. On they walked, back and forth, when suddenly before them gathered a group of “*the Jews*,” meaning by this the Temple aristocracy and religious leadership. So they drew to a halt. The leaders had a simple demand: “*If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.*” We know from elsewhere, especially from the Synoptic Gospels, that our Lord was wary of this title because of its political meanings, although he plainly claimed it on occasion. For instance, with the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s Well, our Lord is clear that he himself is the Messiah of the prophecies (John 4:26). John the Baptist had pointed to Jesus as the Messiah, and many

considered him such. Nevertheless, our Lord remained enigmatic and preferred other titles, especially the Son of Man. The leaders wanted to pin him down on this great point, the better to be able to entrap him. As a matter of fact, they got much more than they bargained for.

The first thing our Lord made clear to them was the reason why they continued to refuse to accept what he had already made clear about himself. *“Jesus answered, I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father’s name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow.”* There had been plenty of indications of his answer to that question, but they *refused* to believe. The telling point here is our Lord’s reason for their lack of faith. It was not due to there not having been enough indication from our Lord about himself. Nor was it because he had not provided sufficient evidence of the truth of his claims. He had told them, and he had worked miracles, signs, to support his claims. Moreover, John, whom all held to be a prophet, had given

testimony to Jesus. The reason was not of this order, but because *they were not his sheep*. This was the reason for their existing refusal to believe, despite all the indications already given. There was a fundamental separation from him, a moral stance shaping their thought and their decisions. Their refusal to believe in Jesus flowed from this foundational *disposition* which meant that they were not his sheep. They simply did not, nor wanted to, belong to him. Their starting points, their preferred assumptions, their deeper moral postures, were at variance from his own, and from God and his holy will. These starting points governed their decision not to believe. Basically they did not like what they saw in Jesus, and this was due to the sin that reigned in them, separating them from him and leaving them in darkness. They had to change, repent, be born again, become new, if they were to find that life that is in him. But there was a further point to his answer. In respect to his being the Messiah — he had already answered that: *“I did tell you, but you do not believe.”* What he now tells them, calmly, without warning, and at

the very Temple itself, is that “*I and the Father are one*” (John 10:22-30). This must have caused an awestruck and powerful silence. They had not mistaken him — he was not merely claiming to be the Christ, *he was claiming to be God*. They immediately prepared for a stoning.

Let us appreciate the depth of the issues featuring in today’s Gospel passage. Our Lord calls attention to the profound moral factors in the act of faith. To believe in him involves one’s entire moral stance. One has to be of a certain moral disposition if one is to believe in Jesus Christ. We ought pray to God that he give us the right foundations, the right starting points, so as to be his “sheep,” persons who belong to him. Further, we must ask God for the grace to appreciate the high majesty of Jesus Christ. He is none other than God himself, one with the Father in being, though separate from him in person. The two are united in love by the Holy Spirit. Let us take our place with him then, and never allow ourselves to stray from him!

Second reflection: (Acts 11:19-26)

The laity in the world We are told at the beginning of our passage today that “*those who had escaped during the persecution that happened because of Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, but they usually proclaimed the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, ... went to Antioch where they started preaching to the Greeks, proclaiming the Good News of the Lord Jesus to them as well.*” The author of The Acts is referring to what the ordinary faithful, the laity, were doing to spread the knowledge of Christ. It was after this had happened that the leaders of the church were sent for. As we read this we are surely reminded of the indispensable role of the laity if the knowledge of our Lord is ever to be brought to the world. In the laity, the Church is present to the world, the world of family, workplace, culture, whatever. But for this to happen the laity must be

possessed of a genuine and correct knowledge of Christ — of doctrine — and be disposed to speak of and bear witness to him. The laity must be ready also to put interested people into contact with the Church's pastors, as did those in our passage from The Acts today.

The triumph of the Church within the Roman Empire depended in large measure on *the witness of the laity*. So it will be in the new evangelization that is now necessary and that will assuredly come. It is the laity who must bring Christ to the secular world of our century.



Wednesday of the Fourth week in Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 18 (17):50; 22 (21):23 I will praise you, LORD, among the nations; I will tell of your name to my kin, alleluia.

Collect O God, life of the faithful, glory of the humble, blessedness of the just, listen kindly to the prayers of those who call on you, that they who thirst for what you generously promise may always have their fill of your plenty. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 12:24-13:5a; Psalm 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8;
John 12:44-50

Then Jesus cried out, When a man believes in me, he does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me. When he beholds me, he sees the one who sent me. I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness. As for the person who hears

my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it. There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day. For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say.
(John 12:44-50)

Christ, unique In the Gospels we read of people taking pride in their great ancestor, Abraham. John the Baptist told the Pharisees and Sadducees that their stepping forward for his baptism was not genuine. *“Do not pride yourselves on the claim, ‘Abraham is our father’,” he told them (Matthew 3:9).* In the Gospel of St John the *“Jews” say to our Lord “We are descendants of Abraham”* (John 8:33). Well, let us set Jesus Christ in Abraham’s company, and ask, would Abraham have dared to claim that *“when a man believes in me, he does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me”*? Would he have gone on

to state that when a man “*beholds me, he sees the one who sent me*”? That is to say, when a man sees me, he sees God. Or again, let us take, say, Moses. Moses was the giant in the Hebrew memory. It was he who led, on God’s instructions, the people out of slavery on their way to the Promised Land. He was the mediator between God and the people in the establishment of the covenant of Sinai which superseded, we might say, the covenant with Abraham. In the sixth chapter of St John, the people ask Jesus to perform a sign so that they might believe in him — after all, *Moses* gave their ancestors manna in the desert (John 6:28-31). Well, let us place Jesus Christ next to Moses. Would Moses have said the things that Christ said? Would he have said, “*I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness. As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it*”? He would never had had such presumption, but Jesus Christ, who challenged his enemies to prove him guilty of any sin (John 8:46), unhesitatingly claimed to be

the light, not just of the chosen people, but of *the world*. He states that no-one who believes in him remains in the darkness, and that the one who refuses to do so does remain in darkness. No recognized prophet, no king or priest, no ancestor whatever of the chosen people of Israel appeared on the scene making the statements and claims that Jesus of Nazareth did. This broad context helps us to appreciate the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

One of the striking features of Jesus Christ is the immediate recognition which, at the outset of his public ministry, he won from at least some. Mahomet gradually gained his followers, but he certainly did not immediately gain recognition as the greatest and final prophet. That came with his success on other, related fronts — including his military success. But before Jesus Christ had so much as begun his public ministry, he was recognized as the Promised One by John the Baptist, whom the people counted as a great prophet. He was the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. John saw his own ministry as being no more than a voice preparing the way

for Another — and that Other was Jesus of Nazareth. At John's prompting, two of his disciples follow Jesus, and stay with him that day. After this, Andrew — one of the two — tells his brother Simon that "*we have found the Messiah!*" (John 1: 41). Philip is invited by our Lord to follow him, and he goes to Nathanael and tells him that "*We have found the one Moses spoke of in the law — the prophets too — Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth*" (John 1: 45). There is no record anywhere in the entire Scriptures of such a recognition accorded to another, let alone so rapidly given. Nathanael, on being introduced to Jesus, and being told by Jesus that he had seen him under the fig tree, said to Jesus, "*Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel*" (John 1: 49). All of this acknowledgment was accepted by Christ — and more still. Find the prophet who dared to present himself as the natural Son of God! Such a thought would boggle the imagination. But this is just what he did, and in the presence of his enemies, those who had power to do him great harm. He did this not only before them, assembled to

condemn him to death, but during his public ministry when they were not expecting it, and in the very Temple. “*I and the Father are one*,” he told them (John 10:30). Islamic readers and others will claim that all Christ meant was that he and the Father are one *in purpose*, but not so “the Jews”. They immediately prepared to stone him. They knew what he meant, and they knew that he meant what he said. He was claiming to be God (John 10:30-33).

One of the features of the so-called Christian West is that over the last few centuries it has become bored with God, and somewhat uninterested in Jesus Christ. In fact, over the last several decades there has been a widespread fad for Eastern religions, yoga, various forms of esoteric meditation and other — what we might call — religious “trips.” There has been a turning away from the Jewel of European civilization. Europe was created by the Catholic religion, and the Catholic religion involves nothing other than love for Jesus Christ. The Jewel has been lost, and we are scrambling after bits of stone. Let us recover our true Love, and give ourselves over to it in earnest. Jesus Christ

is the Song of the ages, the Melody taking us to life everlasting!

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Second reflection: (John 12:44-50)

Christ and his claims One of the things we are very conscious of in our day is the variety of religions. Various personages have shaped human culture and society, especially the founders of man's religions. Now apart from their very different teachings about salvation, one essential difference among them, and in particular between *Jesus Christ* and the other *founders of religions*, is their claims as to their own persons. Mahomet claimed to be a prophet of God, and Islam claims he is the last and greatest of the prophets. His teaching has certain similarities to that of Judaism and Christianity — together with profound contradictions — such that much of it is regarded by both Jew and Christian as borrowed. Our

Lord's claims as to himself are absolutely unique. He claims in today's Gospel that the one who sees him sees the One who sent him. He claims to be the Light of the world. He especially claimed, and was attacked for claiming, to be *equal to God*. Despite these claims — and because of them — he is so utterly convincing.

Let us strive to bear witness to this Jesus, utterly unique, utterly indispensable to our salvation.



Thursday of the Fourth week in Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 68 (67):8-9, 20 O God, when you went forth before your people, marching with them and living among them, the earth trembled, heavens poured down rain, alleluia.

Collect O God, who restore human nature to yet greater dignity than at its beginnings, look upon the amazing mystery of your loving kindness, and in those you have chosen to make new through the wonder of rebirth may you preserve the gifts of your enduring grace and blessing. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 13:13-25; Psalm 89:2-3, 21-22, 25 and 27; John 13:16-20

Jesus said, I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his lord, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be

blessed if you do them. I am not referring to all of you; I know those I have chosen. But this is to fulfil the scripture: 'He who shares my bread has lifted up his heel against me.' I am telling you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe that I am. I tell you the truth, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me. (John 13:16-20)

Lord and Sender Let us notice how our Lord describes himself in our Gospel passage today. In the previous passage he has acknowledged that they call him “*Teacher and Lord*” (*didaskalos kai ho kurios*), and that they do right to call him this. He is indeed their Teacher and their Lord (John 13: 13). If he, then, their Lord and Teacher, has washed their feet (as would a servant), so they should do as he has done. That is, they should act towards others as their servant. Then in our passage today (John 13:16-20), which follows immediately on our Lord’s commentary on his action of the washing of the feet, he refers to himself under two titles. “*I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his lord, nor is a messenger greater*

than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.” He is “lord,” (*kurios*) and he is the one who sends them (*pempsantos*). Let us contemplate these two titles. In many contexts, *kurios* (lord) is little more than a form of reverential address, similar to “Sir” or (in older English, even more reverentially as if to a ruler) “Sire.” For instance, we notice that in the sixth chapter of St John, the people address our Lord as “Rabbi” when asking how he got back to Capernaum (6:25). But a little later, after he explains that there is a bread from heaven that will give life to the world, the people address him as *kurios*, lord — “*Lord, give us this bread always*” (6:34). It is a very reverential form of address, signifying authority. But there is a much higher use of the title *kurios*, indeed one applied to God. In the Gospel of St Matthew an “angel of the Lord” (*aggelos kuriou*) appears to Joseph in a dream (1:20, and 1:24). The Gospel of St Mark begins with a citation from the prophet, calling on all to prepare the way of “the Lord” (*hodon kuriou*) (1:3). In the Gospel of St Luke, our Lady refers to

God as “the Lord” (*kurios*) (1:38, and 1:46). Our Lord himself addressed his heavenly Father as “Lord of heaven and earth” (*kurie tou ouranou kai tees gees*) (Matthew 11:25). The general idea of *kurios* is of one having authority over another, and to whom obedience is due. It is translated into Latin by the word *dominus*, from which we have the English “dominion” and “dominate.”

Cardinal Newman once wrote that the essence of religion is authority and obedience. Of course, the Christian religion understands the authority of God our Father as being informed by divine love, and the obedience of man as being informed by a filial love. Nevertheless, the authority of God is an essential acknowledgment, and it is somewhat captured by the title “Lord.” We refer familiarly and devotionally to Jesus Christ as “our Lord,” or as “the Lord.” The title “our Lord” has this Scriptural warrant that in the Gospel of St John, the very climax is contained in Thomas’s profound acknowledgment of Jesus as “*My Lord and my God.*” Just as Jesus was “my Lord” to Thomas — indicating his complete authority over him as

God — so we now address Jesus and refer to him as “our Lord,” for we *all together* acknowledge his *authority* over us as our *God*. He himself, on the mountain in Galilee and having risen from the dead, told his disciples that all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to him (Matthew 28:18). That is to say, he was “the Lord.” As the Lord on the mountain of Galilee, he gives to his disciples the commission to go to the whole world and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them and teaching them to observe his commands. Jesus, then, is the Lord of all things, seen and unseen.

But this leads to the next title our Lord employs in our Gospel passage today. He is the One who sends his disciples out — “*no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him*” (John 13:16). The disciples are messengers. Strictly, the meaning of the Greek (*apostolos* — apostle, envoy, ambassador) is “*one who is sent*,” an “envoy.” In the Gospel of St John, the first thing the risen Jesus does when he appears to his disciples is to send them out: “*As the*

Father sent me, so I send you” (John 20: 21). The message is that Jesus Christ is Lord. He has redeemed mankind, and all are called to share his life by baptism, and to accept his law and his commands. This is the way to salvation. The whole Church acknowledges Jesus Christ as “Lord,” just as the Old Testament (in the Septuagint Greek) acknowledged Yahweh God as “Lord.” Acknowledging and accepting this, it receives from Jesus Christ its mission. An essential part of the Christian life is this mission to bring the knowledge and love of Jesus to the world.

“Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.” The Church carries the authority of Jesus Christ to teach in his name and to introduce all to him as their Lord. *“I tell you the truth, whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me; and whoever accepts me accepts the one who sent me”* (John 13:16-20). Let us contemplate the Person of Jesus Christ. He stands apart, above and beyond all others as the one and only Lord, but at the same time he is united with us as our Brother and our Redeemer, our Friend and our Saviour. Let us never separate ourselves

from him, then. His is the only name by which men can be saved (Acts 4:12).

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Second reflection: (John 13:16-20)

Welcoming the Lord The beatification of a Pope (such as Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II), and the thought of a reigning Pope, reminds us of what our Lord says in today's Gospel — "*whoever accepts anyone I send accepts me.*" The Church prays that the Holy Spirit will ensure that the successor of Peter whom God has chosen is given to us. In John Paul II, the Church had a great Pope, God's gift. In his successor, Benedict XVI, another was given. The majority of deceased popes of the twentieth century (Pius X, and then from Pius XII to John Paul II) are canonized or on the way to canonization. Pope St Pius X once said it is impossible to be holy if we do not love the Pope. There is a real danger that, inundated as we are by the media, we might come to view the things of God after

the manner of the secular media, which is to say with the mind of the world rather than with the mind of Christ.

Our Lord tells us two things: that “*whoever welcomes the one I send welcomes me,*” and secondly, “*whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me*” (John 13:20). Let us resolve to be open to his teaching, aiming to be good soil ready to receive the word of God as it comes to us from the lips of our chief pastor. Thus will we bear fruit in abundance in holiness of life.



Friday of the Fourth week in Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Rev 5:9-10 You have redeemed us, Lord, by your Blood, from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us into a kingdom, priests for our God, alleluia.

Collect O God, author of our freedom and of our salvation, listen to the voice of our pleading and grant that those you have redeemed by the shedding of your Son's Blood may have life through you and, under your protection, rejoice for ever unharmed. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 13:26-33; Psalm 2:6-11ab;

John 14:1-6

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place

for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going. Thomas said to him, Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way? Jesus answered, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:1-6)

Afterlife I vividly remember watching the Australian movie decades ago, called *Jedda* (1955). It was the first to star two Aboriginal actors (Robert Tudawali and Ngarla Kunoth) in the leading roles, and also the first Australian film, I am told, that was shot in colour. *Jedda* is an Aboriginal girl born on a cattle station in the Northern Territory of Australia. She is raised learning European ways and separated from other Aborigines. She wants to learn about her own culture, but is forbidden. The Aboriginal man Marbuck eventually abducts her, and his tribal council sings his death song for bringing *Jedda* to them. He goes insane because of the thought of the death song, and the final scene, so memorable, shows him pulling

Jedda with him as he falls back off the cliff to their deaths. What I also found memorable was the final script following Jedda's death. Joe, the half-caste Aborigine who is in love with Jedda and who tracks Marbuck and Jedda for several days to their horrifying end, speaks of Jedda's departed spirit. Jedda has joined "*the great mother of the world, in the dreaming time of tomorrow.*" It was a powerful end to a striking movie, and the Afterlife for Jedda is that envisaged by traditional Aboriginal culture, at least as the script writers understood it to be. There has been, across the ages, a great variety of understandings of the Afterlife in culture and religion. Some cultures have advanced conceptions of the Afterlife, involving a form of Judgment on the deceased with its consequences. I think here of classical Egyptian religion, however debased it was in other respects. Other cultures have had the most meagre of notions of an Afterlife. Even the text of Old Testament Revealed Religion prior to Jesus Christ did not have a very special strength in this particular respect. Its notion of the one and only God who was Bridegroom of his people was

extraordinary when set against the religious world of its time. But there was not a lot on the Afterlife. The case was altogether different with the teaching of Jesus Christ. Apart from all that he revealed about the one God in three divine Persons and about the Atonement brought about by the triune God, he also revealed with striking clarity the truths of the divine Judgment both General and Particular, and Heaven and Hell. The Afterlife suddenly became, with Jesus Christ, a major dogma of Revealed Religion.

So striking is Christian doctrine on the Afterlife that for the last two centuries at least, its dogma on Hell has been a major stumbling block for many. Cardinal Newman acknowledged this and worked to alleviate the impact on the modern imagination of this dogma. He suggested ways of understanding the eternity of Hell that alleviated somewhat the thought of its unending and total misery — and he did this to clear away obstacles to belief that can beset the modern imagination. The modern Western secular mind tends to be agnostic, bordering on one or other form of atheism. There is no Supernatural. This

world is all that there is. This has been the advancing assumption, and I have known elderly people — the typical community neighbour, as it were — who have thought that at the end of life, there will be nothing further for them. Just as any animal, the pet dog or cat, finishes its existence at death, so does man. He is buried, and all that is left of his Self is what is lowered into the grave. Just before John Henry Newman was beatified by Pope Benedict XVI in England, in September of 2010, his coffin was exhumed with a view to placing his relics in the Oratory church of Birmingham where he had lived. All his bodily remains were discovered to have gone because of the dampness of the cemetery. His spirit, of course, lives with Christ in Heaven. Now, for the agnostic or atheist, this life is all that there is. At the end of this life, there is nothing more — just as there was nothing left of Newman's physical remains. Talk of the Afterlife is mere fanciful conjecture. But no — we have it on the word of Jesus Christ, confirmed by the Tradition of his Church, that there is a Judgment, then an eternity of Heaven or Hell. All this

brings us to our Gospel today (John 14:1-6), in which our Lord speaks so wonderfully of Heaven. There is nowhere in the Scriptures — prior to Jesus Christ — any teaching so exalted as is his teaching on Heaven. *“In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”* Every day of our lives we have something wonderful to look forward to. It is our everlasting homeland of Heaven.

The great Rosary crusader of the second half of the twentieth century, Irish priest Father Patrick Peyton, once said that he was looking forward to death. He was a man full of peace, joy and kindness. The reason why he was looking forward to death was not because he was suffering so much and looked forward to a release from it — but because he was looking forward to *Heaven*. Death was the door to Heaven. Heaven, of course, is our meeting with and living forever with Jesus Christ. Father Peyton longed to see the face of Jesus Christ. This alters everything about

death. From being a dark black hole into which we must fall, it becomes a door suffused with light. Heaven! Let us never lose sight of it! It will fill all our days with music, music that lasts forever.

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Second reflection: (John 14:1-6)

A place awaits us There are many things that can cause us weariness in life, and even a sense of futility. As a result, a dynamic use of time can be lost. But time is precious and is not to be squandered by inactivity. What then can give us constant motivation? One source of motivation is the thought of what finally awaits us. Our Lord in our Gospel passage (John 14: 1-6) tells us that he is going ahead of us to prepare a place for us, so that where he is we may be too. Our Lord has a place awaiting us in heaven. On one occasion James and John (together with their mother) asked our Lord if he would place them at his right and left in his kingdom. He replied that those places belonged to those to whom they had been allotted. So a

place in heaven has been allotted us. Our Lord wants us to use our time during life to get to that place that is awaiting us.

Let us then often think of heaven, our true homeland. There we shall attain our true rest and happiness, where every tear will be wiped away. We shall be with God and innumerable friends. Let us not waste our time! Let us use it for the glory of God and the salvation of souls.



Saturday of the Fourth week in Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Cf. 1 Pt 2:9 O chosen people, proclaim the mighty works of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light, alleluia.

Collect O God, who in the celebration of Easter graciously give to the world the healing of heavenly remedies, show benevolence to your Church, that our present observance may benefit us for eternal life. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 13:44-52; Ps. 98:1-4; John 14:7-14

Jesus said to his disciples, If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him. Philip said, Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us. Jesus answered: Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen

the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves. I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it. (John 14: 7-14)

Love him! One of the leading authorities on Australian Aboriginal religion was William Edward Hanley Stanner (1905-1981). In 1935, on his second field work, W.E.H. (Bill) Stanner accompanied Father Richard Docherty to Port Keats, now known as Wadeye on the south western coast of the Northern Territory, halfway between the mouths of the Daly River and Fitzmaurice

River. Father Docherty, a priest of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart order, was to establish a mission in that region and Stanner helped him choose the site at Port Keats. Much of Stanner's outstanding published work as an anthropologist was based on his field work with Indigenous Australians in the Port Keats Wadeye area. In his *On Aboriginal Religion* (VI, no.(7), no.1) he says that "*The religion was one of those constructed, as someone has said, in the third person.*" I think he meant that in their religion the Murinbata (the tribe of Aborigines of the Port Keats area) celebrated what "they," the spirits, did. That is to say, their religion did not involve much of an I-Thou relationship, nor much direct prayer to the spirits. They revered "them" (i.e., the spirits as spoken of), rather than "you" (the spirits as addressed). I mention this as an example of what is perhaps common. People can conceive of religion in a way that brings them to its mere threshold. They think about the Objects of their religion (say, Buddha, Zarathustra, or this or that deity), and govern their lives by what they are taught, without entering into a

deeper and deeper *relationship* with the deity itself. That, at least, is a real danger for man in his religion, and it is a danger for the Christian too. The Christian can miss the call to enter into a profound personal relationship with God and Jesus Christ, and be somewhat content with thinking about him as an inspiring example, and rest in a certain conformity to the Christian way of life. His religion can amount to a celebration of what “he” (Jesus Christ) did and the results of his life, rather than an *I-Thou relationship with him*. But of course, the personal relationship is the foremost component of revealed religion. We are commanded to love God with our whole heart. He is to be the direct object of our heart and affections.

Of course, there is certainly plenty to think “about,” when thinking “about Jesus Christ.” We are speaking of a definite, historical man, a man of a certain place and time, a man with certain features, a certain build, a certain language with its own accent, a certain ethnic, cultural and religious background, a certain timbre in his voice — in every way an historical individual. Just as when we gaze

on any person we know, we are looking at a person who is totally individual and unique, so too with Jesus Christ. But he was unique in a way that transcended all others. Each of us is a unique embodiment of the human nature we commonly share, but he was unique in the sense that he was not merely man. His Person was divine. His Person was necessarily divine by nature, and was so from all eternity. But in the fullness of time he took to himself a human nature as well, and thus this divine Person became man while remaining divine. When one looked on him, one was looking on God, God in his human nature. Having taken to himself a human nature, by that fact his divine Self embraced his body and made it his own. When looking upon the face of Jesus Christ, one looked upon the face of God. But there is more. It was the Second Divine Person who became man, and he is none other than the image of the unseen God, such that in looking on him one was looking on the image of the Father. In a sense, the Father looks like the Son because the Son is his Image. All this brings us to our Gospel passage today (John 14: 7-14). Our

Lord is at the Last Supper, and is revealing himself more intimately to his disciples. *“If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him. Philip said, Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us. Jesus answered: Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me?”* He who sees Jesus Christ, sees the Father. Jesus is in the Father and the Father is in him. However, we must not simply think “about” this astounding revelation. What is offered to us is a personal relationship, a direct, personal I-Thou friendship with Jesus.

In the Christian religion, the religion revealed by God as the way for all the nations, there is offered the heights of involvement with God himself. We are invited to love God in Jesus Christ with all our mind, heart, soul and strength — in fact, we are commanded to do this. Jesus is the way, as he is the truth and the life. He is the way, and the only

way, to the Father. No one comes to the Father but by him. By becoming his friend, and keeping his commands, we are thereby on the way to life eternal. Indeed, by baptism and a Christian life, we are already enjoying this life. Let us resolve, then, to make the personal *love* (and not just the thought) of Jesus Christ the grand goal of our lives.

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Second reflection: (John 14:7-14)

A lively faith in who Jesus really is One of our biggest dangers in our spiritual life is that we will tend to take our Lord for granted. That is to say, we will tend through familiarity to lose sight of who our Lord really is. As people gazed on our Lord it was obvious that he was truly man. But here in our gospel passage our Lord tells his disciples that he who knows and sees him knows and sees the Father. He implies that if one is properly disposed and truly open to reality, it ought be evident that Jesus is

the revelation and image of the Father: *“Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and still you do not know me?”* The Father is in him, and is doing the work that Jesus is doing.

This same Jesus is the Eucharist. Our danger will be that we will tend to take the Eucharist for granted. In our prayer, let us exercise our faith in Jesus and in what he has revealed about himself. He was put to death for bearing witness to the truth about himself. Let us make sure that our whole life is filled with faith in our Lord’s revelation, and given over to bearing witness to it. Jesus, the Eucharistic Jesus, is the source and object of our whole life.



Fifth Sunday of Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 98 (97):1-2 O sing a new song to the Lord, for he has worked wonders; in the sight of the nations he has shown his deliverance, alleluia.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, constantly accomplish the Paschal Mystery within us, that those you were pleased to make new in Holy Baptism may, under your protective care, bear much fruit and come to the joys of life eternal. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 6:1-7; Psalm 33:1-2, 4-5, 18-19;
1 Peter 2:4-9; John 14:1-12

Jesus said to his disciples: Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take

you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going. Thomas said to him, Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way? Jesus answered, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him. Philip said, Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us. Jesus answered: Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves. I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.(John 14:1-12)

The only Way If we compare the Judaism prior to Christ with the religion which, from the midst of Judaism, Christ founded, one of the notable differences between the two is the active missionary character of Christianity. Judaism had always quietly spread, due mainly to the spread of its Diaspora. Our Lord does refer to the proselytism of the scribes and Pharisees, and condemns the kind of religious practice into which those scribes and Pharisees initiated their neophytes. But, by and large, the spread of Judaism beyond the land of Israel was due to the natural spread of Jewish people to other parts of the world. With this spread and proliferation of synagogues and Jewish belief, there was a corresponding entry of non-Jewish converts. At one point we read in the Gospel of “Greeks” who were in Jerusalem for the feast, and who wanted to speak with Jesus. However, a new phenomenon appeared on the Jewish scene with the Ascension of Jesus Christ and the sending of the Spirit at Pentecost. From within the heart of Judaism there appeared a powerful impulse to spread “the Way” (*Acts of*

the Apostles). Remarkable missionaries began their travels, and endured great sufferings and persecutions in the process. Within several decades, the new body had attracted the unapproving notice of the Empire, and even of the Emperor himself. Nero accused the Christians of beginning the fire of Rome — something for which he himself was probably responsible. While the missionary impulse of the Christian Church grew, thus marking it out from its Jewish origins, there was also an increase in the savagery of the persecution against it. Christians for the lions! began to be heard with frequency. But the missionary impulse continued. Less than three centuries after the Death of Jesus Christ, the Empire had been conquered by him without a battalion. Islam later spread remarkably, but as a result of armies and military aggression. But now, what we must notice is the heart and soul of the Christian advance. At the heart of it was the profound conviction that the only way to the Father was through Jesus Christ. He was the only name by which men could be saved.

This had its origin in the clear teaching of Jesus Christ. He stated with the utmost clarity that “*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*” He is the one and only Saviour of the world. The Jewish religion allowed but one God, of course, but this was tolerated by the Empire because the Jewish religion, wherever it was present in its synagogues, communities and religious schools, did not aggressively seek to replace the religious principle of the Empire. But the case was different with the Christians. They were united, and they were, it seemed to the Empire, unacceptably aggressive and, for all the love they professed, intolerant. They wanted to convert everyone. They had this idea that Jesus Christ was the only way to immortality. Nothing seemed able to put them down, and broadly speaking, they seemed to increase amid difficulties. They remained missionary. It was a disease, a religious plague, that was very difficult to stop, let alone eradicate. What was at the heart of it? At the heart of it was this unsettling notion that there was but one Saviour of

the world, one way to God, one way to be truly good and holy. This was through the Person of Jesus Christ — someone whom an official of the Empire had put to death on charges of sedition, but whom they, his devotees, claimed arose from the dead glorious in a new life. It was this business that he was the “*only way to the Father*” which was the impossible bugbear, and that to get access to him all must enter his “Church,” a Church that was not some national body, but “universal,” “catholic,” everywhere. This fundamental teaching, expressed by our Lord in our Gospel today (John 14:1-12), has been the driving inspiration of the Church in her missionary endeavour across the centuries ever since. But over the last century there has penetrated the consciousness of many of the Church’s children a notion which attacks this basic doctrine. This is the notion, widespread in the culture of our day, that there is no truly objective truth. All is relative to the thinking subject. It is therefore deemed to be preposterous to claim that there is but one way to God out

of the mire of sin. Further, it is considered an affront to others to claim that one's own way is truer than theirs.

This is not the moment to analyse the philosophical notion that there cannot be but one way to God, and indeed that there cannot be but one objective truth about the matter — or indeed about any matter — and that all is relative to who you are, and how you happen to think. The point here is to be alert to the modern danger of admitting, for various reasons, the assumption — only vaguely expressed, perhaps — that Jesus Christ cannot be the only, the one and only, way to the Father. Especially in our modern world, with the philosophical culture which pervades it, the member of Christ's Church must reaffirm in his own heart, and bear witness in his own life, the truth that Jesus Christ is the only name by which we can be saved. Such is Christ's teaching. Such is our firm belief.

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Second reflection: (John 14:1-12)

The Pope: Christ's representative The great majority of Catholic people obtain their news, and any commentary on the news, from the secular media. The danger is that they will come to look on things of religion and the Church with the secular mentality pervading the secular media. That is to say, because of the influence of the world, we can easily drift into looking on the things of God in a worldly way rather than with the mind of Christ. I once read in the *Sydney Morning Herald* a brief article in which the author (who I am sure was not a Catholic) referred in passing to the Pope as the Vicar of Christ on earth. I suspect that a large number of non-Catholic Christians would more or less regard the Pope as just that. That is to say, he is the highest representative of Christ on earth and a number of other things besides, such as the highest and most authoritative living voice of the moral law. Now, the question is, how should the *Catholic* regard him, for the Catholic should take his cue from Catholic *doctrine*, not from the world. The Pope is the living and

appointed father or pastor of Christ's flock — we call him the Holy Father. The fourth commandment says, *Honour your father and your mother*, so we must honour and love the Pope if we wish to put on the mind of Christ. The word "Pope" is derived from the word for "father" — hence he is commonly addressed as "Holy Father". A Catholic priest is customarily addressed as "Father" because he, as spiritual father of Christ's flock, represents Christ and brings the life of Christ to others. It is really a recognition of Christ. More than anyone in the Church, this applies to the Pope. So we should love and honour the Pope, and show this love and respect for him publicly before others within the Catholic fold, and to those outside the Catholic fold as well, so that they too may come to respect and love the Pope. For he is the representative of Christ for the whole world, even if there are many who do not recognise this. Part and parcel of having a filial respect and love for the Pope will be praying for him, as is done in every celebration of Mass. We ought also study and follow the

Pope's ongoing teachings, so available as they are on the Internet and in print publications.

All the Popes of the twentieth century were distinguished for their talent, learning and sanctity. The twenty-first century began with highly distinguished Popes, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. In today's Gospel our Lord speaks of himself as the image of the Father, and as being in the Father and the Father in him. Let us resolve to live out our Catholic Faith with a filial love and respect for our Lord's highest representative on earth, the Pope.



Monday of the Fifth week in Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon: The Good Shepherd has risen, who laid down his life for his sheep and willingly died for his flock, alleluia.

Collect May your right hand, O Lord, we pray, encompass your family with perpetual help, so that, defended from all wickedness by the Resurrection of your Only Begotten Son, we may make our way by means of your heavenly gifts. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 14:5-18; Psalm 113b; John 14:21-26

Jesus said to his disciples, Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him. Then Judas (not Judas Iscariot) said, But, Lord, why do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world? Jesus replied, If

anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me. All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. (John 14:21-26)

Love and obedience It is very possible to be so used to Christian doctrine as to fail to appreciate the extraordinary novelty of our Lord's teachings as they appear in the Gospels, and in particular in the Gospel of St John. For this reason it is always helpful to read the Gospels in the context of the entire Scriptures, including the Old Testament. Set our Lord's words alongside the teachings of the prophets — Moses, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezechiel and the others — and notice how striking they are. Our Lord speaks not only of our obeying God, but of our obeying *him*, Jesus. Moses never made the

centrepiece of religion knowing, obeying and loving himself. His mission was to pass on to the people the commands of God and to insist on the one God being the centrepiece. It is the same with all the prophets. They strove to recall the people to obedience to God, while revealing more and more aspects of his will as it had been revealed in the covenants (of Noah, Abraham, the patriarchs, and Moses) before them. They pointed to a new covenant that was coming, but the Lord God was its heart, soul and centre. They were, as John the Baptist described himself, a mere voice. Suddenly there appeared as if from nowhere the Galilean from Nazareth who spoke and acted as no-one had before him. He was attested by John the Baptist and by his own astounding miracles — but it became progressively evident in his teaching that *he himself* was to be the heart and soul of man's religion. By knowing and loving and obeying *him*, one knew, loved and obeyed God. While Moses and the prophets — in the Law, the Psalms and the Prophets — had pointed above, Jesus pointed to *himself*. Indeed, he claimed that the Patriarchs,

Moses and the prophets had been speaking in prophecy directly of *him*. *Abraham saw my day and was glad*, he said. There appeared to be a great shift in revealed religion with the coming of Jesus, but this shift, our Lord said, was in fact its fulfilment. The gaze of all was to turn now, we might say, away from the sky above directly to Jesus before them.

In one of his works, John Henry Newman describes the essence of religion as consisting in authority and obedience. In our Gospel passage today our Lord states that “*Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me.*” The Law commanded that we love the Lord our God with all our heart and strength. Here our Lord speaks of love for himself: “*he is the one who loves me.*” The test of love for God in the Old Testament had been obedience to his law. The same test applies now for our love for Jesus. We must receive his commands and obey them. More, the one who loves him will be loved by “*my Father,*” and, our Lord assures us, “*I too will love him and show myself to him.*” He is speaking as if love for *him*

and the knowledge of *him* is the heart of religion. The whole point is then reaffirmed, when questioned by Jude. Our Lord repeats that the test of love for him is obedience to his teaching. *“If a man loves me he will keep my words,”* and he repeats it again a little later: *“He who does not love me will not obey my teaching.”* Then he adds, *“and my Father will love him and we will come to him and make our abode with him.”* Our Lord here once again, as he has before, places himself on a par with the Father. It scarcely needs to be said that this teaching is without precedent in revealed religion. It is a new revelation and dramatically so, even though there is a general backdrop and preparation for it in the inspired writings. Jesus will come with the Father, and they together will make their abode with the one who obeys his words. They will make their home with that person. It is as if a new Tent of Meeting was being established with each person who loves and obeys. God made a Tent of Meeting in the desert with his people, and there he would meet with Moses his servant. But now Jesus and the Father will come and abide with his servant

who keeps his word. There is a third Person, the Counsellor, who will also be present and very active: “*the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you*” (John 14:21-26). The Spirit too will come.

The Christian religion consists in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ, expressed in obedience to his teaching. In loving and obeying Jesus Christ, we love and obey the Father, and in all of this we are being taught by the Holy Spirit who has been sent to us by the Father in the name of Jesus. So there are three divine Persons who abide with each of us, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and the Church has long called this the Indwelling of the Most Holy Trinity. But to retain this inestimable treasure, we must obey the word of Jesus Christ. Religion is indeed a matter of authority and obedience, but the spirit that pervades this is the spirit of Christian love. Let us love Jesus, then!

Second reflection (Acts 14:5-18)

The distinctiveness of the Christian spirit In the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 14: 5-18, we are presented with a few striking contrasts. The first is the response to the preaching of Paul and Barnabas. We read that both pagans and Jews made attacks on them at Iconium. So Barnabas and Paul went to Lycaonia and there they cured someone of his crippled condition. They were in consequence hailed and treated as gods, a response which both of them vehemently repulsed. But at least the response of the Lycaonians is revealed as starkly in contrast with that of the Jews and pagans at Iconium. The Lycaonians were thoroughly open to see the presence and action of the supernatural in the ministry of Paul and Barnabas. In their misguided fashion, they provide us with an example. We ought be thoroughly open to the action of God in the ministry of the Church and the Church's

pastors. Another contrast is suggested to us in the very reaction of Paul and Barnabas to this response of the Lycaonians. Ancient rulers were very ready indeed to accept the honours due to God or that were granted to the gods. Paul and Barnabas would have nothing of it, of course. All glory was to be given to God.

Let us take our cue from this too, and while being open to the action of God in our daily life — especially in the Church's ministry of word and sacrament, let us resolutely refer all honour and glory to Him.



Tuesday of the Fifth week in Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Rev 19:5; 12:10 Sing praise to our God, all you who fear God, both small and great, for now salvation and strength have come, and the power of his Christ, alleluia.

Collect O God, who restore us to eternal life in the Resurrection of Christ, grant your people constancy in faith and hope, that we may never doubt the promises of which we have learned from you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 14:19-28; Psalm 145:10-13ab, 21;
John 14:27-31a

Jesus said to his disciples: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid. You heard me tell you, 'I am going away and I will come back to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going

to the Father; for the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it happens, so that when it happens you may believe. I will no longer speak much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me, but the world must know that I love the Father and that I do just as the Father has commanded me.” (John 14:27-31a)

The ruler of this world We are not given a lot of information about the Evil One in the Old Testament. In the Book of Job (ch. 1-2) he is *Satan* (accuser), as also in Zechariah 3: 1-2. In the Septuagint the Hebrew *ha-Satan* in Job and Zechariah is translated by the Greek word *diabolos* (Devil — slanderer), the same word in the Greek New Testament from which the English word *Devil* is derived. Let us set aside here the discussions of the date of various books of the Old Testament, and simply note that the most obvious Old Testament action of Satan or the Devil is in Genesis 3 (without these names being used there). The *Serpent* tempts Eve, and through Eve tempts Adam, into eating of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good

and Evil. It led to the terrible condemnation of the original couple and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. God tells the *Serpent* (or the “Shining One”) that “*I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your seed and her seed; it shall crush your head, and you shall bruise his heel*” (Genesis 3: 14-15). The Book of Wisdom interprets the Serpent as the Devil: “*through the devil’s envy death entered the world and they who belong to his party experience it*” (2:24). But our principal source even for the interpretation of relevant passages from the Old Testament is the New Testament. The New Testament Book of Revelation places the primordial deception affecting the whole world at the feet of the “*Devil and Satan*” who is “*that ancient Serpent*”. “*The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world – he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him*” (Revelation 12: 9). Of all the prophets, none can equal Jesus Christ for his dramatic confrontation (in the Gospels) with Satan, the Devil. It is significant that,

in the Synoptics, the encounter begins at the doorway to our Lord's public ministry immediately after his baptism. Satan was his immediate interlocutor. In this initial drama, the devil pretended to be lord of all. *"Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me'"* (Matthew 4:8-9). In Luke's account, Satan claims that *"all this authority has been given to me, and I give it to whom I will"* (4:6).

That is how Satan understood his own position: the kingdoms of the world were his for the giving, for he was the ruler of this world. He was the lord of the nations, and he was in competition with the one Lord of all. Of course, our Lord repulsed him with the assertion of Holy Scripture: *"Begone, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve'"* (Matthew 4:10). It is of significance to observe how Christ refers to Satan during his public ministry. At one point he was accused of exercising demonic power over the netherworld.

It was “*by the prince of demons that he cast out demons*” (Mark 3:22). So Satan was, in his own realm, perceived by Christ’s critics as a *prince*. Our Lord did not deny that Satan was a prince. He replied, “*how can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand If Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end*” (3:23-26). So Satan is the head of a kingdom, and there is a certain unity in its forces. Moreover, Satan can insinuate himself behind his enemy’s lines, which is to say within the ranks of Christ’s closest disciples. When our Lord was teaching his disciples how “*the Son of man must suffer many things, and he rejected .. and be killed, and after three days rise again*”, Simon Peter (doubtlessly with great love) strongly objected. Our Lord told him, in the presence of his disciples, that he was, in this, Satan. “*Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men*” (Mark 8: 31-33). Satan certainly gained entry into our Lord’s select band. St John tells us that Satan entered into Judas Iscariot (John 13:27). So he came to *direct* him. All

of this brings us to our Gospel passage today, in which our Lord refers to Satan as a “ruler”: *“I will no longer speak much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me, but the world must know that I love the Father and that I do just as the Father has commanded me”* (John 14:27-31a). There was a real sense in which the Devil was *“the ruler of this world.”* He had a certain power and it was extensive. But he had no power over Jesus Christ who loved the Father, and did exactly what the Father wanted. His obedience would destroy the realm of the Devil.

I have seen the Devil popularly depicted as a figure of fun, dressed up as a devil but with an impish grin — as if he is someone to enjoy a party with. Satan is an implacable murderer and deceiver. It is in nobody’s interest to be having anything to do with him, for he has hateful and deadly purposes. We are having to do with him if we deliberately entertain temptations to sin of any kind, no matter how venial. The path to Hell begins with deliberate venial sin. Unrepented of, venial sin then

becomes deliberate vice, habitual sin, and the door is opened to mortal sin of thought, or word or deed. Behind such actions or phantasies is the chuckle of the Devil. He is whispering as we go, stroking gently as we make our way downwards. As he watches our descent in venial sin, he follows closely behind rubbing his hands with glee. The calls to repentance are ignored, and finally we slip over the edge of serious sin and ultimate death. Let it never be this way! Let us take our stand with Christ all the way up to Heaven, bearing the Cross and ever repenting, with him before us and the grace of the Spirit sustaining us.



Wednesday of the Fifth week in Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 71 (70):8, 23 Let my mouth be filled with your praise, that I may sing aloud; my lips shall shout for joy, when I sing to you, alleluia.

Collect O God, restorer and lover of innocence, direct the hearts of your servants towards yourself, that those you have set free from the darkness of unbelief may never stray from the light of your truth. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 15:1-6; Psalm 122:1-5; John 15:1-8

Jesus said, I am the true vine, and my Father is the Vinedresser. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear

fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. (John 15:1-8)

Good work One of the fundamental features of created reality — that is, reality that is not God — is that it is in a state of change and motion. Nothing appears to be simply static. It may appear to be still, but it is not. There is movement afoot everywhere, right to the tiniest proton. It may be “stable” as we might refer to the condition of a person as being “stable,” but it is not simply “static.” Movement and change is characteristic of everything in the visible universe in one sense or another. Especially do we notice this in living things — they come to be and they

pass away, and while they live, they act, they change, they do things. One of the things which living things do is that they do what they need to *survive*, and, speaking analogously, they “work” to gain what they need in order to live. I say “analogously” because, as Pope John Paul II once wrote, only man properly “works.” In this analogous sense, the tree in the valley “works” (as we might say) at growing to a height, and in a way that is long and straight, in order to get access to the sun’s rays. The bees “work,” as do the ants, as do other living animals and insects, to gain sustenance — without realizing that they are “working,” nor choosing to do so. They must “work,” because they are driven by instinct to do so. They are compelled thus to act because of instinct, and in this sense they cannot be said to be engaged in “a work” properly speaking. They do not have a “work” in life. Nevertheless, their activity, as with the activity of the rest of unthinking creation, shares in the fundamental characteristic of all of visible creation to be “up and doing,” as we might say, in attaining certain ends. Man also is a being in action. He is

an “acting person.” In a certain sense, he has no choice in this — he *will* do things, he *will* alter. He does have a limited choice, though, as to *what* he will do and *how* he will do it. If he is to flourish he must engage in action that is *good*. That is to say, he is called by nature and by inclination to do good work, and by means of his good work to become good himself and help others to be good. That is the *choice* facing every man and woman. The happiness of every person depends on how he answers this question: What work in life will I choose to do, and how well shall I do it?

Let us pass on from the analogy that exists between the “activity” of all things other than man to attain goals, and the “work” that man is called to engage in. Let us consider human “work,” and its varied upshot from one man to the next. Man yearns to do good work, and if he does not do so, or if he declines in his yearning to do good work, then he declines as a man. Just as we can define man as a rational animal, or a religious animal, we might define him as a “working” animal — understanding the

activity of non-rational animals as “work” only in an analogous sense. Man is an acting person, a person who “works.” Now, as we all know, the most excellent of persons can work with goodness, integrity and intelligence. Yet, despite their efforts, they may see success or failure result. Blessed Teresa of Calcutta attained world-wide *acclaim* for her “good work” in life. Due to the grace of God, her life of work for God sanctified her and sanctified others. It was most successful. Blessed John Paul II did splendid work as Pope, and the world accorded him high *praise*. However, there have been many other excellent persons who have worked untiringly for God and others, with prudence and integrity, and who have finished their days in *oblivion*. They too, many of them, have been accorded the highest honours of the Church. What then, is good work, in the Christian sense of the word — as the Church recognizes it? Our Gospel today (John 15: 1-8) gives us the clue to this, and it is important for every man and woman, because most people will pass into relative *oblivion* in terms of historical memory. Fame, enduring

acclaim for good work done, may or may not be part of the plan of God for this or that person who does his work in life. But all are called to do good work. So, in what will it principally consist? Our Lord tells us: *“I am the true vine, and my Father is the Vinedresser. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful... Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”*

No matter who we are, we can do good work in life, work that will fulfil the purpose for which we are made. The essential thing is to work *in union with God*, striving to *do his will*. Specifically, this means living in union with Jesus Christ, as a branch lives by the vine of which it is a part. This is the essential element in doing good work. If we remain united to Jesus Christ, and he with us, the one in the other, just as he is in the Father, and the Father is in

him, then whether there be fame or oblivion, we shall bear much fruit, fruit that will last. Apart from him, we can do nothing. There we have it. Good work, as God sees it and as our Lord explains it, is possible for everyone.

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Second reflection: (John 15:1-8)

The pruning by the vinedresser One of the most profound of man's problems is the problem of his own suffering, and the difficulty of seeing some sense, some point, some meaning in it. Our Lord in our Gospel passage today sheds some light on the matter. He says that "*every branch in me that bears no fruit he cuts away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes to make it bear even more.*" There are two cases here: the one bearing no fruit and the one bearing fruit. In both cases there is a cutting process at work. On the one hand, the branch that bears no fruit will ultimately be cut away from God. That is to say,

for those who do not live by God and by his life, suffering will come and it will result in death, spiritual death. On the other hand, those who live by the life of God will also be subject to suffering. There will be a pruning, a cutting. Their suffering will be administered or allowed by God for their greater growth and fruitfulness. Just as the vine must be pruned to bear more fruit, suffering under the loving hand of God will be necessary for the one who wishes to be God's friend, and serve God's plan.

Our Lord tells us to make our home in him, as he makes his home in us. This means ensuring that his words remain in us and that we keep them, no matter what the cost.



Thursday of the Fifth week in Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ex 15:1-2 Let us sing to the Lord, for he has gloriously triumphed. The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation, alleluia.

Collect O God, by whose grace, though sinners, we are made just and, though pitiable, made blessed, stand, we pray, by your works, stand by your gifts, that those justified by faith may not lack the courage of perseverance. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 15:7-21; Psalm 96:1-2a, 2b-, 10;
John 15:9-11

Jesus said to his disciples: As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his

love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. (John 15:9-11)

Love The Oxford social anthropologist, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, seems to have thought that it was impossible to summarize into a common type the various religions of primal (i.e., “primitive” or “simpler”) peoples. The religions of primal people display such a vast array of differences that a common pattern is very difficult to discern. In the Conclusion (P.121) of his “Theories of Primitive Religion” (Oxford, 1965), he states that none of the main attempts to explain primitive religions have been satisfactory. Be that as it may, I would make one point. It seems to me that the *love* that is *intimate friendship* between the deity or deities and their devotees is not notable in the religions of man. The gods are too distant and not sufficiently interested in man for this to happen. Religion, of course, is the life of converse between man and the gods as he conceives them to be. But positive *love* does not seem to be generally characteristic of the relationship between man and the deities he worships. In

the one, or at most the few exceptions to this, religion is monotheistic, involving the acknowledgment of one God. The religion of the Hebrews stood out as monotheistic, and it had this singular feature that their God had a *covenant* with his people. He had chosen them, not they him. The Hebrews — despite their constant battle against the temptation of polytheism — had an undying sense that they were the objects of Yahweh's *love* and saving action in various great respects. Most notably, he had saved them from oppression and slavery in Egypt and had conducted them to their own promised land. There is debate among scholars versed in archaeology and ancient middle-east history as to how absolutely reliable are the historical details in the biblical narrative of this archetypal event. But the firm memory of it stood and stands in the life of the Hebrew people. God *loved* them and saved them in that event and in many others, indeed as if he were a *Husband* to them. The prophets spoke of him as *Husband*, and of them as his chosen *spouse* — often unfaithful. This form

of monotheism was singular in the ancient world. Its very singularity supports its own claim to be divine in origin.

But then out of the midst of Judaism came Jesus Christ. He spoke of God not just as the Father of Israel his “son” (“out of Egypt I called my son”) but of *himself* as the Father’s own *natural Son*. God was, he told the very leaders, “*my Father*.” They thereupon picked up stones to put an end to him because, not content with violating — in their myopic view — the Sabbath, he called God his own personal Father, *thereby making himself equal to God*. He did not resile from this, but went on to say, in other contexts, that “*before Abraham ever was, I AM*.” He said that the Father was in him, and he was in the Father. That is to say, there stood forth a Person who spoke of God as his own Father, enjoying with him the utmost intimacy of friendship springing from oneness in Being. I cannot think of any great leader of religion speaking of his relationship with the Deity in the way Jesus Christ did. It was an absolutely new revelation which Jesus Christ presented, built on what was present in Judaism. Religion became

indisputably a religion of the deepest *love* between God and man, man in general, but especially man in particular, *individual man*. Jesus Christ, proclaiming before men this special relationship which he himself had with God by virtue of his very Sonship, announced that all who believed in him would be privileged with a share in this relationship. The whole human race could have access to it. God would not only be the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, but their Father too. They would become adopted children of God, with a share in the Sonship of Jesus Christ by virtue of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Thus has the religion of man been transformed, because man himself has been transformed. By baptism he becomes a new creature, and this because of the gift to him of the Holy Spirit at his acquisition of faith and at his reception of Baptism. We are children of God and called to the perfection of love for God our Father, for Jesus Christ our Lord and Brother, and for the divine Spirit our Sanctifier. It is this *love* about which our Lord speaks in the Gospel today. “*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my*

commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love" (John 15:9-11).

Let us cling to the thought and the attraction of love, love for Christ who has loved us first. The bedrock of religion now, if we are to begin with what God has done and revealed, is the personal and tender love which God has for us. This is what we must first realize and make the foundation of our life. On this basis is religion, the religion of the individual and the religion of mankind, built up. God loves us personally, and he calls us to share his life as members of the Church which he founded. Let us do all we can to fan into an undying flame the life of love for God which takes us through life to him, for ever and for ever.

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Second reflection: (John 15: 9-11)

Abiding in the love of Christ When man thinks of God, various thoughts and emotions come to him. He thinks of greatness and power, perhaps also of remoteness. He thinks too of goodness — that God is good, a good Spirit. He thinks of many other things besides. But our Lord in our Gospel passage today speaks of *love*. In simple language he tells us that the Father loves him. We cannot possibly imagine this love with any degree of adequacy because everything about God is infinite. The almighty Father loves the almighty Son, and this limitless love has been and is the eternal life of God. Indeed, this love is the Holy Spirit. Now, if we can gain an impression of the love of the Father for Jesus his Son, this impression may help us appreciate our Lord's love for us. Our Lord says, "*As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you*" (John 15:9). What we must do, then, is contemplate at length the love of God and come to know it well, making it the basis of our life. Our Lord asks us to remain in his love, just as he remains in his Father's love. The key is obedience,

obedience to Jesus and his commandments: *“If you keep my commandments you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and remain in his love.”*

This is why Cardinal Newman once wrote that obedience is of the essence of religion. Religion involves the loving fulfilment of our God-given duties, and as Pope Benedict XV taught early in the twentieth century, perfection in the Christian life is the perfect fulfilment of our God-given duties. Christ was obedient to his heavenly Father. We must strive to follow in his footsteps.



Friday of the Fifth week in Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Rev 5:12 Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and divinity, and wisdom and strength and honour, alleluia.

Collect Grant us, Lord, we pray, that, being rightly conformed to the paschal mysteries, what we celebrate in joy may protect and save us with perpetual power. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 15:22-31; Psalm:56; John 15:12-17

Jesus said to his disciples, My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit- fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other. (John 15:12-17)

The ethos of love One of the distinctive features of the Oxford Movement during its heyday of the 1830s was the stress on religious “ethos.” By “ethos” was meant the moral temper of mind, the characteristic spirit or outlook of a person, or community, or church or society. The meaning of “ethos” can be difficult to define. Broadly, it means the characteristic spirit of an individual, a community, people, system or civilization. The men of the Oxford Movement thought that the “ethos” of a person or a movement was itself evidence of the truth or otherwise of their position, and that it also accounted for their position. This is because a certain “ethos” or temper of mind favours the acquisition of truth, while another does not. A person or even a society whose temper of mind was shaped by immoral assumptions and principles was unlikely to be in possession of the truth. Conversely, error was to a point

due to a bad “ethos.” They thought that atheism, agnosticism or religious heresy was due not merely to the rational processes which a person or society passed through in attaining to its conclusion (that there is no God, or that there can be no certainty as to a God, or that Christ is not God, etc.), but also to the cast of mind, the basic principles and assumptions, the moral temper of mind and life with which a person engages in that reasoning process. This temper of mind, this “ethos” — produced by various basic assumptions — will profoundly shape the direction of a person’s reasoning. It will govern what he expects to be true, what he expects to be probable, and so what he will take, all things considered, to be true. Thus the “ethos” of one man will lead him to a radically different conclusion from another who has an entirely different “ethos.” A certain “ethos” favours the acquisition of truth, another the fall into error. The “ethos,” spirit, or temper of mind can and does vary enormously from one man to the next, as it varies from one religion to the next, and from one civilization to the next. It may lead a person to accept one

religion as true and another as false, but also, a religion with a certain “ethos” will itself shape the spirit or “ethos” of a person. A Christian civilization will have a different “ethos” from, say, an Islamic civilization.

I say this by way of introduction to our Gospel today. If we were to speak of the “ethos” of the Christian religion, at the forefront of any description of it would be *Love*. A Christian, if his religion has truly shaped his mind and his life, is a man whose whole cast of mind supports a reign or civilization of love. The love that he envisages and constantly assumes to be the ideal of life and action is not just any kind of love, but the love that is exemplified and embodied in the historical figure of Jesus Christ. It is the image and thought of Christ which forms his basic assumptions and provides his foremost motives. It shapes the temper of mind with which he approaches the various issues in life, and it governs his response to practical problems. If he is gravely insulted, he will tend to forgive — at least he will try to forgive, because he will have before him the image of Jesus Christ. This will be the

spirit in which he will approach daily life, his temper of mind, his characteristic outlook, the “ethos” of his life. He will probably say, too, that this very ethos favours the acquisition of truth. If he is a man of Christian love, he is much more likely to attain religious truth at least in the fundamental matters of life, than if his “ethos” were totally at variance with this. On the other hand, a man of a very different set of religious beliefs, with its very different “ethos,” will have a very different response to insult and injury. He may regard it as divinely preferable to return the injury in kind. An entire society, with such an “ethos,” such a temper of mind, may respond with open anger and injury to injury that is received — and do so with the clearest conscience. “Ethos” is indeed a most important factor in the life of individuals, societies and civilizations. The point here, though, is that we have a clear idea of the “ethos” of the Christian religion. It is one of love, Christian love, the love of Jesus Christ. So it is that in our Gospel today, our Lord tells us that *“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no*

one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command” (John 15:12-17).

The ground rule of the Christian religion is that *love* must be the governing principle of the whole of life, be it individual, social, religious. It is love according to the *mind and life of Jesus Christ*. The mission of the Church and of each Christian is to introduce this as profoundly as possible into the life of the world, so that more and more a civilization of love grows. Society’s “ethos” ought become more and more imbued with the mind of Christ. Thus do we all advance towards the goal of being truly children of our heavenly Father.

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Second reflection: (John 15:12-17)

The essence of the Christian religion There are many ways of understanding religion, and various notions of what the practice of religion entails. And it ought be obvious that if we are to make progress in our religion we

need to have an understanding of what our religion really consists in or else we shall lose our way. What then is the essence of the Christian religion? It is friendship with Jesus, who is accepted as God and man. If we wish to grow in the Christian religion we must grow in a personal friendship with Jesus and be faithful to the demands of this friendship during life. And this is what our Lord refers to in today's Gospel (John 15:12-17). Our Lord has loved each of us and, because of this love, has laid down his life for each of us. He wants us not just to be his servants but his friends with whom he shares his mission and his plans. Out of love for us he has chosen us, invited us to his friendship, a friendship that is essentially apostolic in the sense that it involves participating in his mission of bringing others into friendship with him.

Let us make our whole life a response to this choice Christ has made of us to be his friends.



Saturday of the Fifth week in Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Col 2:12 You have been buried with Christ in Baptism, through which you also rose again by faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead, alleluia.

Collect Almighty and eternal God, who through the regenerating power of Baptism have been pleased to confer on us heavenly life, grant, we pray, that those you render capable of immortality by justifying them may by your guidance attain the fullness of glory. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 16:1-10; Psalm 100:1b 2, 3, 5;

John 15:18-21

Jesus said to his disciples, If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is

why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me. (John 15:18-21)

The Christian not of the world In our Gospel passage today, our Lord tells his disciples that they “*do not belong to the world.*” There is a sense in which this may be said to distinguish the Christian. Let me explain by drawing a contrast. There has long been controversy among scholars of Australian aboriginal religion as to what element in it is the most fundamental. The Dreaming is fundamental, but the question is, what is it in the Dreaming which is the core principle? Is it the Ancestors — whether sky-beings or totemic? Is it the rituals, say — of Initiation? Or is it perhaps the myths? My own estimate is that the profound attachment to *the land* and all that is connected with the land is what is fundamental to traditional Aboriginal religion. It is this which is the inspiration of the

Dreaming and which grounds so much in the religion. That is to say, the traditional Australian Aborigine has a deep sense of connectedness with the world of which he feels himself to be part. He is bonded with it at many levels. So much is this so that I have seen it discussed whether there is in the religion any sense of realities that *transcend* the world. It could be that the mythic figures, including the All-Father (say, *Baiame*) of the South-Eastern tribes (as described especially by Howitt), were imagined as essentially and inescapably *part* of this world. The Australian Aborigine felt a profound affiliation with this world, and this belonging to the world was the inspiration of his religion which pervaded his life. I remember attending an address at Sydney University given by a Zoroastrian scholar of religions. He maintained that to a large extent religion was a *technology*. It was a means to gain some benefit — such as survival or sustenance. In the case of the Australian Aborigine, I think he would have said that much of their religion, myth and ritual was oriented to maintaining life on their “land” and in their

world. That was its function. Of course, much of any religion springs from the need of man for aid from the higher powers (however they are imagined or conceived) in his quest for survival. But the point I wish to highlight here (by means of this introduction) is the sense in man of his being deeply part of this world which is his home. It is evident even in religion, such as this example I have given of Australian aboriginal religion.

We are all deeply connected with the “land” — our “land” (for want of a better word). It is one reason why the typical religion of man is a local one, or rather, one that is both co-extensive with his particular culture and a product of it. If the culture extends to other societies and regions, so does the religion. It is most unusual for there to be a religion that is essentially catholic or universal, and which is meant for any and every culture. Usually, a religion is local or national, and identifies with a particular culture or civilization. Man is a part of “his world”, and he feels it to be so. His religion is, typically, part of his profound connection with his “own world” and his awareness of the

sacredness of his world. But Revelation introduces new considerations, and I have referred to Aboriginal religion in order to highlight one notable feature of the religion of Jesus Christ. To begin with, as the Book of Genesis points out (1:27), man was made *in the image of God*. So he cannot simply identify with the world. The world is not simply and utterly his home, because to a real extent, he himself is different in kind. In an important sense, too, the disciple of Jesus Christ is not at all at home in the world. The Christian religion has not arisen from the world as from its home and origin, but has come to it as a transforming Visitor. In the very prologue of his Gospel, St John introduces the tolling of a special bell. It is the toll of the world's unfriendliness towards its divine Visitor on whom it depends, Jesus Christ. The Light which enlightens every man was coming into the world. *He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not.* This enmity towards the Word made flesh is a great theme of the story of the world's salvation.

In revealed religion, the Creator intervenes to fix the world up. He enters the scene, and the world does not like it. It senses that it is going to have to change. There is a sense in which God become man did not find himself “at home” in the world, though he loved it so much. Now this is precisely what our Lord Jesus Christ warns his disciples about in our Gospel today. *“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you”* (John 15:18-21). A distinctive feature of the thoroughgoing Christian is that he is in the world but not of it.

Jesus Christ was in the world, but he was not of the world. He came to save it, and he saved it by being crucified. He bore the anger of the world and by so doing, atoned for the world’s sin. We are called not to find our ultimate home in the world, but in God, God made man. A distinctive feature of the man of revealed religion, the one who follows Jesus Christ closely, is that he will not

belong to the world — and in this he differs from what we might call the man of natural religion. Our true homeland is in heaven, and this world is our passageway. It too will pass away, and be transformed into something new and everlasting. This will be the final gift of the Creator. Let us take our stand with Jesus Christ, and live in union with him as he labours through us to transform the whole world for God both now and forever.

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Second reflection: (Acts 16:1-10)

The divine freedom On one occasion when Our Lord cast out many devils from a person, that fully recovered person pleaded with our Lord to be allowed to follow him physically. But our Lord said no. Rather, he was to return to his own people and tell them the good things God had done for him. This he did. Now, why did our Lord not allow him to follow him? We do not know —

it was not his will. But not so with, say, Mary Magdalene, from whom he cast out seven devils. Our Lord willed her to follow him right to the empty tomb. Why the difference? We do not know. It was his will. This mysterious divine freedom is evident, too, in today's passage from the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 16:1-10). Paul and his party travelled through Phrygia and Galatia, and were told by the Holy Spirit they were not to preach in Asia. Why? After all, would it not have been a good thing to do this for the sake of the Gospel? We are not told. It was God's will. Moreover, the Spirit of Jesus would not let them go into Bithynia. Why? We are not told. But through a dream, a vision, they were summoned to Macedonia. Why? We are not told.

Let us remember that whatever be the plans we ourselves have, the important thing is to seek and find God's will — and then do it. Nothing else matters. Let us ask the Holy Spirit to help us know and do the divine will.



Sixth Sunday of Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Is 48: 20 Proclaim a joyful sound and let it be heard; proclaim to the ends of the earth: The Lord has freed his people, alleluia.

Collect Grant, almighty God, that we may celebrate with heartfelt devotion these days of joy, which we keep in honour of the risen Lord, and that what we relive in remembrance we may always hold to in what we do. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 8:5-8, 14-17; Psalm 66:1-7, 16, 20;
1 Peter 3:15-18; John 14:15-21

Jesus said to his disciples: If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever — the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he

lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me any more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him. (John 14:15-21)

The other Advocate Many years ago when I was a young student of theology it was observed that the Holy Spirit was the forgotten Person of the Blessed Trinity. Not a lot was said about the Holy Spirit — and it was thought by some that not a lot *could* be said about him. Since then a lot *has* been said about the Holy Spirit, and it has been realized that a lot *ought* be said about the Holy Spirit. Notwithstanding this, I think he is still forgotten by too many of Christ's faithful. In the Gospel today our Lord refers explicitly to the Holy Spirit: "*I shall ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you for ever, that Spirit of Truth whom the world can never receive*

since it neither sees nor knows him; but you know him, because he is with you, he is in you.” We have been sent this wonderful Person to be with us — “*another Advocate.*” The first Advocate, or Defender, is our Lord himself. Christ came to defend us by his witness to the truth against falsehood and death, and to save us by his Death and Resurrection from our Enemy who is *a liar and a murderer from the beginning*. Our Lord declared before Pontius Pilate that he had come into the world *to bear witness to the truth*. He also said that he had come that we may have life, and life in abundance. He was and is our Advocate, our Defender, and the time will come when he will take us to be with him forever. But now he was sending his Divine Spirit, the Spirit of Truth to be with us for ever. He would be the other Advocate. Every Sunday when we recite the Creed after the homily we state that we believe in *the Holy Spirit, Lord and Giver of life*, and that *equally with the Father and the Son he is to be adored and glorified*. He is the one God, as is the Father and as is the Son. It was by the power of the Holy Spirit that God the

Son became man. The Holy Spirit came upon our Lord in a new way at his baptism in the river Jordan and then led him into the desert to begin his struggle and victory over Satan. It was by the power of the Holy Spirit that our Lord fulfilled his public ministry and it was especially by the power of the Holy Spirit that he offered himself up for us on the Cross. It was by the power of the Holy Spirit that he rose from the dead. It was this same Holy Spirit whom Christ breathed on the Apostles, and who came upon the Church at Pentecost.

It was about this same Holy Spirit that our Lord speaks to us in today's Gospel (John 14:15-21), telling us that he would be sent to remain with us for ever. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, came to each of us at our baptism and at our confirmation. It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that the bread and wine at Mass become the risen body and blood of our Lord, and it is by the power of the Holy Spirit that Christ comes to us in power in the other Sacraments. It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that our sins are forgiven in the Sacrament of Penance, and it is

in order to receive his cleansing and sanctifying grace that we ought approach this Sacrament regularly. This most important Sacrament had its origin in Christ's gift of the Holy Spirit to his Apostles on the day he rose from the dead. On the evening of that day our Lord appeared to his disciples and breathed on them the Holy Spirit. Then he gave them the power to forgive sins. *Those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven them*, he said. If we are in the state of grace, he is our constant Guest, and it is by his power that we each of us is a temple in which dwells the Holy Trinity. He sustains our faith and enlightens it as we make use of the spiritual treasures available to us in the life of the Church. He leads us to seek holiness and to do good things for Jesus Christ our Saviour. Above all, it is by his grace that we bear witness to Jesus. The great problem is that we do not think of him or ask him for his aid. We are all too often oblivious to the presence of the Holy Spirit within us, there to guide and enlighten and inspire us to seek and attain truth, and to help us on the path towards sanctity. Imagine if we were to have a guest of the highest

importance in our home day by day, and never to greet that guest nor to engage in any conscious relationship with that person! And imagine if that person were someone who could help us attain our true goals in life! So it is with the Holy Spirit. Let us then make a real point of cultivating a devotion to the Holy Spirit. He can help us attain holiness of life. He is the Sanctifier of souls. He can help us engage effectively in a daily apostolate, because he is the Evangeliser of the world. Let us resolve to love, revere and listen to the Holy Spirit. He dwells within each of us.

Let us not ignore the Holy Spirit and make him sad by our sins. Let us rather love and honour him and be led by him to holiness and to the apostolate. *Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful! Enkindle in them the fire of your love! Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end!*



Monday of the Sixth week in Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Rom 6:9 Christ, having risen from the dead, dies now no more; death will no longer have dominion over him, alleluia.

Collect Grant, O merciful God, that we may experience at all times the fruit produced by the paschal observances. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 16:11-15; Psalm 149:1b-6a and 9b;
John 15:26-16:4a

Jesus said to his disciples, When the Counsellor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, he will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning. All this I have told you so that you will not go astray. They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think

he is offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me. I have told you this, so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you. (John 15:26-16:4a)

The Spirit of Truth There is an especially poignant scene in the Gospel of St John — that between Jesus Christ and Pontius Pilate. There Christ stood before the man who represented the Empire and the Emperor. Christ is calm, restrained, courteous. There is not the slightest fawning on the man who holds civil authority and the power to execute. Had Christ been standing before Tiberius himself, he would not have behaved nor spoken any differently. Perhaps as he looked on Pilate, he thought of the Empire he represented. We read in the Synoptic Gospels of Christ's dialogue with Satan at the beginning of his ministry. Satan showed him the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and offered them all to him if he would but worship him. Perhaps right now, Christ was thinking of the kingdoms of the world, and was readying himself for their conquest. That conquest would come, and

it would come by means of bearing witness to the truth about himself. For his part, as Pilate gazed on the man before him, there was no doubt in him that there was something very special about this Man — *ecce homo!* He quickly saw that he had been handed over by the religious authorities of this difficult, occupied population because of their envy of him. He had gained greater sway over the minds and hearts of the people than they. What troubled Pilate also was what the priests had just accused Jesus of — that he claimed to be “*the son of God.*” My guess is that Pilate was troubled because he was beset with pagan superstitions. This special Man before him — “*where are you from?*” (John 19:8-9). Little did he realize that this Man before him would conquer the Empire. The Empire would eventually acknowledge him as the Lord and King. It would be done by means of *witness*, and not by arms. His followers would bear witness, just as the Master who had gone before them had borne witness. The appointed head of this Man’s disciples, Peter — the Rock of the Church — would become the bishop of the Imperial City

itself, and his successors, the Popes, would bear witness in this city to the world age after age to the Person and mission of Jesus Christ.

Bearing witness! This is what changed the religious principle of the Roman Empire. It began with Christ bearing witness before Pontius Pilate. On that occasion, so full of significance, our Lord explained his mission before the world as represented by Pilate. His mission was to bear witness. *“For this was I born, to bear witness to the Truth. All who are of the truth, listen to my voice”* (John 18:37). He had told his disciples the night before that he was *the Way, and the Truth, and the Life* (John 14:6). But now, there was Another, high and beautiful, who was working in him who was the Truth, in him who was the master Witness. I refer to *the Spirit of Truth*, the Holy Spirit. Christ’s own mission was to bear witness to the Truth, and those who believe in him share in his mission of bearing witness to the Truth — but behind Him and them there is the action of the Spirit of Truth. The Spirit of Truth is the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. Those

who believe in Jesus and who follow him have been granted by their faith and baptism a share in the Spirit of Christ, that Spirit who is the Spirit of Truth. He it is who enables us to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ in bearing witness to the Truth of Jesus. The religion of the Empire changed because witness was borne to the Truth of Jesus, and this was due to the action of the Spirit of Truth. In our Gospel today, Jesus tells his disciples that *“When the Counsellor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, he will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning”* (John 15:26-16:4a). The Spirit of Truth, the Truth that is Jesus, is sent by Jesus to us from the Father. It is from the Father, through the Son, that the Spirit of Truth proceeds. He sustained Jesus Christ as he bore witness to himself before the children of Israel, and then, in a different manner and to a different degree, before the Empire. He sustains us all as we endeavour to bear witness to Jesus before the people of our day. Let us understand clearly that the world depends on

our witness, and that the world can be changed by our witness, just as it was changed in the days of the mighty Roman Empire.

There was no greater political and military phenomenon at the time of Jesus Christ than the Roman Empire. It lasted centuries upon centuries. It, though, was conquered by Jesus Christ, and when the Empire fell before the barbarians, Jesus Christ conquered them — and thus Christian Rome gave way to Christian Europe. But it all depended on bearing witness. This, though, depends totally on the action and the grace of the Spirit of Truth through whom Christ bore witness, and by means of whose aid we all of us are enabled to bear effective witness. The world depends on our living a life of witness to the Truth of Jesus. Let us then depend on our divine Counsellor, Friend and Guide.

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Second reflection: (John 15:26-16:4)

Opposition It goes without saying that we, as Christians, ought resolutely oppose those things that are at variance with the teachings and values of Christ. We must expect the opposition of those who do not accept the witness we bear before them to Catholic teaching. There are many values in society that are contrary to what God has revealed — an obvious example being the area of sexual morality. The Church is dubbed as hopelessly conservative and reactionary. In respect to opposition to the witness we bear to the truth, let us note what our Lord says in our Gospel passage today. He says that “*the hour is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is doing a holy duty for God.*” It is possible to fight against God and to sincerely think that one is doing what is right.

All this is part and parcel of following the Master.



Tuesday of the Sixth week in Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Rev 19:7, 6 Let us rejoice and be glad and give glory to God, for the Lord our God the Almighty reigns, alleluia.

Collect Grant, almighty and merciful God, that we may in truth receive a share in the Resurrection of Christ your Son. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Prayer over the Offerings Grant, we pray, O Lord, that we may always find delight in these paschal mysteries, so that the renewal constantly at work within us may be the cause of our unending joy. Through Christ our Lord.

Scripture today: Acts 16:22-34; Psalm 138:1-3, 7c-8;

John 16:5-11

Jesus said, Now I am going to him who sent me, yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' Because I have said these things, you are filled with grief. But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away.

Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned. (John 16:5-11)

The Counsellor One of the most obvious things which the prophets required of the chosen people to whom they were sent was *faith*. If, for instance (as was the case, to a point), the people did not *believe* that Elijah was sent by God, then what could Elijah do? *Faith* was always a necessity — faith in those sent by God to speak and act on his behalf. Now, if that was the case with all the prophets, pre-eminently was it so of our Lord. He was sent as the fulfilment of the prophecies and the promises. He was the final word coming from God for the redemption of his people and of “*all the families of the earth.*” But all depended on *faith* — not so much on great intellectual

capacity (reason), although reasoning was involved. It depended on *faith* in Jesus of Nazareth. Our Lord strove to induce faith in himself, giving numerous signs of his glory so that they would believe in him and become disciples. This was the work of God, he taught, to *believe* in the One whom God had sent. But this was a most difficult task, and our Lord had lots of disappointments ahead of him. Apart from bringing the *crowds* to a true faith in him and not merely to a desire for miraculous benefits, there was his difficulty and disappointment with many of his very *disciples*. A dramatic instance of this occurred when our Lord (in John chapter 6) publicly announced his doctrine of the Holy Eucharist. Why did our Lord deliver such a public test of faith — declaring that unless people eat his flesh drink his blood, they would not have life in him? We are not told, but we are told the result: many of our Lord's disciples left him (John 6:66). Perhaps our Lord wanted to pare things down and separate the wheat from the chaff. We read in the same chapter that “*Jesus knew from the first who those were that did not believe*” — they did not truly

believe, that is. He did not just want *apparent* disciples who were following him for just any reason. He wanted *true* disciples, and he may have chosen to let his declaration of the truth about himself do its work. But the point here is that this all-important work of winning faith was difficult and disappointing. It was, as we say, a very up-hill battle — all the way up to Calvary. Think but of the disappointment he had in one very select disciple, Judas Iscariot! Satan won him over completely. Our Lord appealed and strove for faith, and he was hugely rejected.

Of course, all this was part of the mysterious salvific plan of God, and Christ's submission to this plan saved the world. But what we notice is that there was One coming after Jesus Christ who would make all the difference to the upshot of his difficult and tremendous work. The *Counsellor* was coming, the *Paraclete*, the *other* Advocate. This brings us to our Gospel today (John 16:5 11), in which our Lord declares that "*Now I am going to him who sent me, yet none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' Because I have said these things, you are filled with grief.*"

But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment". Our divine Lord had had but limited success. At the Last Supper, his disciples said to him that *"Now we know that you know all things .. that you came from God"* — to which our Lord replied, *"Do you now believe?"* (John 16: 30-31). Our Lord's response shows the struggle he faced in bringing even his disciples to a true faith. Even after the Resurrection, they still had numerous misconceptions: *"Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"* (Acts 1:6). The difference would come when the Holy Spirit was sent, and our Lord knew it: *"you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth"* (1:8). It was for the good of his disciples and for the world that the Counsellor was coming, and, mysteriously, were Christ not to go — by way of the

Passion — then the all-important Counsellor would not come. It is he, more than Jesus himself, who would *convince* them and the world. It is as if, in God's plan, there is a limit to what Jesus himself can do prior to the coming of the Spirit. Jesus lays the indispensable foundation which is the redemption of man, but the work of making disciples of all the nations is especially the work of the Counsellor, the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth. What the Spirit would do is that he would penetrate minds and hearts in a way that Christ had not — and our Lord promised this. *“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you”* (John 16:12-15). The Acts of the Apostles is the special record of the work of the Holy Spirit, and is parallel to the work of Jesus Christ recorded in the Gospels.

One of the most notable things about the Holy Spirit who is a Divine Person and the one God, as is the Father and the Son, is his seeming hiddenness. He is especially evident in his effects, most notably in the effect of his

coming on the infant Church at Pentecost and its aftermath. But characteristically he himself is out of sight and hearing, working mightily behind the scenes and never attracting attention to himself. We are speaking of the great God, the divine Spirit. He is strikingly humble and modest, if we may say so without disrespect. But he is all-powerful and he does things which, in the plan of God, our Lord left to him. Let us love the Holy Spirit. Let us pray for his help and never make him sad.

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Second reflection: (John 16:5-7)

It is better for you that I go When we think of the Apostles, one thought we naturally have is how privileged they were to have walked in Our Lord's company. But, during the Last Supper, Our Lord made statements to them that seem to tell us that *we* are in a better position *now* than the Apostles were in when they

were in his company. He tells them that despite their sadness at the thought of his leaving them, “*still, it is for your own good that I am going, because unless I go, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you*” (John 16:5-7). So we are in a better position than if we had been with our Lord physically, prior to his Ascension. For some mysterious reason, it was necessary for him to return to the Father if he was to send us the Holy Spirit. With the Holy Spirit, we are able to understand many things we would not, were we not to have him — and our Lord mentions some of them in our passage.

So let us rejoice in our situation. We are temples of the Holy Trinity, through the power of the Holy Spirit. We have been given the grace to believe in Christ, to accept his word, and to live accordingly. One result is the possession of joy, the joy of Christ. For good reason St Paul exhorts us, “*Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice.*”



Wednesday of the Sixth week in Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 18 (17):50; 22 (21):23 I will praise you, Lord, among the nations; I will tell of your name to my kin, alleluia.

Collect Grant, we pray, O Lord, that, as we celebrate in mystery the solemnities of your Son's Resurrection, so, too, we may be worthy to rejoice at his coming with all the Saints. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 17:15, 22-18:1; Ps. 148:1-2, 11-14;
John 16:12-15

Jesus said to his disciples, I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.

All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you. (John 16:12-15)

The Spirit of Truth

Professor Antony Flew (1923-2010) was a British philosopher who belonged to the analytic and evidentialist schools of thought. He was well-known for his works on various aspects of the philosophy of religion. He taught at the universities of Oxford, Aberdeen, Keele, Reading, and at York University in Toronto. Over the course of his academic career he had been an advocate of atheism, maintaining that atheism ought be presupposed till there is empirical evidence of a God. He also criticised other fundamental ideas of religion such as the notion of life after death, the answer to the problem of evil by recourse to free will, and the very meaningfulness of the idea of God. However, in 2004 he announced that, in keeping with his long commitment to go where the evidence leads, he now believed in God. Subsequently he wrote the book *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*, with

contributions from Roy Abraham Varghese. In the end, it was a scientific application of the teleological argument for God that impressed Flew. The evidence of order and purpose in the structure of the universe requires a Mind to account for it. It was early in 2004, six years before his death, that Flew informed Gary Habermas (his friend and philosophical adversary) that he had become a deist of the sort that Thomas Jefferson was. That is to say, reason sees design in the universe, and so there must be a God — but there is no supernatural revelation, nor any “transactions between that God and individual human beings.” There is certainly no afterlife. He expected his own death to be the end for him. He said that “What I was converted to was the existence of an Aristotelian god, and Aristotle’s god had no interest in human affairs at all.” It had power and intelligence but was very different from the God of the Christians and very far from the God of Islam. His god was not the God of revealed religion. He accepted Intelligent Design — a position which had a bad press in other contexts early in the twenty-first century. This was

as far as Flew got, and it began with his fundamental principle which, he said, Socrates insisted on. It is that one must follow wherever the evidence leads.

It is interesting to note that Cardinal Newman, who was writing in England a century before Flew, was not particularly impressed with the Argument from Design, and in any case, said that of itself it would never take a person to the God of Revelation. His thesis is borne out in the case of Flew. But what is more telling is how much further than Flew do so many ordinary believers reach in their apprehension and recognition of the Ultimate. The Ultimate, Flew eventually decided, was the god of Aristotle or, perhaps, that of Spinoza. It was a god which kept out of the way, it was not bothersome — and it promised nothing. Human life was unaffected by its existence, and the idea of God entering the scene to be crucified was preposterous. Let us rejoice that Flew emerged from his formal atheism at least to deism, but let us rejoice even more that so many others with nothing of Flew's education go far further along the path of reality and truth. They not only come to

know the true God with the utmost certainty, but become personally involved with him in a life of love — and they are sanctified by him. Many become saints because of their union in love with God. Indeed, the Good News of the Gospel is that man can become God's friends and share his very life. All have a vocation to sanctity, and this is possible through the saving work of Jesus Christ. It bears out Newman's scepticism about mere reason, reason alone. Newman gave emphasis to a lively and right-grounded conscience which will sense the reality and presence of a God who requires the doing of what is good, and which will open a person to Revelation. More than anything, though, the case of the mere philosopher and his limits helps us appreciate what our Lord Jesus Christ has given to us: a share in his own divine Spirit. By the gift of the Holy Spirit at our Baptism, we receive the grace of faith. This gift of faith empowers and inclines us to accept the revelation of Jesus Christ and to perceive its absolute reality. As our Lord says in today's Gospel, "*when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He*

will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you” (John 16:12-15). Come, Holy Spirit!

If you, as a Christian and member of the Church which Christ founded, are aware of your faith in God and in Jesus Christ his Son, and if you are aware that this faith is strong, rejoice in the power and grace of God in you that has brought this about. It is God’s gift, the result of the Spirit of Truth coming to you especially at your Baptism. The gift of faith is the foundation of everything, and it sets you not only on the path to the knowledge of God, but on the path to sanctity. As our Lord says in the Last Supper, *Eternal life is this, to know you, Father, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.* Let us treasure this above all else, and never allow anything to threaten it.

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Second reflection: (Acts 17:15.22-18:1)

The gift of faith For hundreds of years in the classical world, Athens was the centre of culture and sophisticated thought. In our passage today from The Acts of the Apostles we read St Paul's address to the famous Athenian forum, the Areopagus. St Paul begins by finding common ground with the Athenians. He refers to their monument dedicated to the Unknown God, and moves to the God who revealed that a judgment was coming, and who raised up Jesus from the dead. But for all their sophistication, their culture and their familiarity with new and foreign religious movements, the Athenians were poor material for what Paul spoke about. A few displayed an interest, but St Paul ended up moving on to Corinth. One wonders, incidentally, whether the Athenian concept of "God" — the Unknown God — had starting points which were not favourable to Revelation. In any case, the account of St Paul's attempt reminds us of how very fortunate we are to have received the gift of faith. Whether or not we are people of culture and education, having the

gift of faith disposes us to accept the truth of what God has revealed as it comes to us from the Church. The example of the Athenians shows us how lacking in this disposition we may have been were we not to have received this gift.

Let us cherish this gift, so fundamental to the purpose of our life. Let us nourish it with the best and purest of sources, and strive to help others to receive it from above.



Thursday of the Sixth week in Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 68 (67):8-9, 20 O God, when you went forth before your people, marching with them and living among them, the earth trembled, heavens poured down rain, alleluia.

Collect O God, who made your people partakers in your redemption, grant, we pray, that we may perpetually render thanks for the Resurrection of the Lord. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 18:1-8; Psalm 98:1-4; John 16:16-20

Jesus said to his disciples, In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me. Some of his disciples said to one another, What does he mean by saying, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me,' and 'Because I am going to the Father'? They kept asking, What does he mean by 'a little while'? We don't understand what he is

saying. Jesus saw that they wanted to ask him about this, so he said to them, Are you asking one another what I meant when I said, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me'? I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. (John 16: 16-20)

Joy There were two big events at the end of April, 2011. The first, and in terms of world media coverage the more prominent of the two, was the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton in Westminster Abbey on April 29. The second was the beatification on May 1 of Pope John Paul II exactly six years after his death, with more than a million of the faithful attending in Rome. Both were occasions of great joy. Inasmuch as the royal wedding riveted the attention of vast numbers of various religions and none, the massive media coverage was of itself a great good. Great numbers of people saw portrayed before them the ceremony of a Christian marriage, and heard words that referred to God, Christ, and the vocation

to Christian marriage. They heard an excellent homily preached for the occasion, and one can only presume that it was an occasion of grace for many people. It was hoped that the marriage thus celebrated provided an example for others in the future. The point I would highlight here, though, is that it was an occasion of *joy*. There was *joy* for the couple being married, and that joy consisted in the love and closeness they felt for one another. Marriage is a perennial cause of human joy, and it is a cause of joy for others to witness it, especially, of course, those most closely connected with the ones being married. The joy comes from love, from friendship, from human association, from relationships. The second great event was the beatification of Pope John Paul II less than two days later in Rome. It was also the occasion of great joy, and the joy was due to the love for God which distinguished that famous Pope. Great numbers of people felt close to him — they felt they had been loved by him, and that he had brought the love of God to them. Again, the joy that was experienced had to do with love. So important is joy, so

evident is its value, that there is a sense in which people would accept that if a person has found joy in life, a joy that endures, he has attained life's goal. I am not speaking of mere pleasure, gratification, or "a good time." I am speaking of joy, something which many, I suspect, are in danger of never possessing, let alone securely or to a marked degree.

In our Gospel today, our Lord promises *joy* to his disciples — it will be theirs when he is with them again. *"Jesus said to his disciples, In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me."* Our Lord is clearly referring to his Passion, Death and Resurrection which is about to descend upon him. Very soon they will not see him, and then they will see him. They could not understand this, and this incomprehension harmonizes with what we read elsewhere in the Gospels. When, during his public ministry, our Lord referred to his having to suffer and die in order to enter his glory, we read that the disciples could not understand him. Despite his repeated warnings, it just did not sink in. Simon Peter on

one occasion presumed to take our Lord aside and remonstrate with him about all this kind of talk. It was ridiculous, he thought. His intervention drew a powerful and public rebuke from our Lord. Still, they could not catch on — and here at the Last Supper, when the whole terrible course was about to be set in train, they still could not envisage what our Lord was trying to convey. So our Lord emphasises again what he has just said: they will soon be engulfed in grief for he will be gone, while “the world” will rejoice at his departure. Importantly, though — and this is the keynote of the passage — “*You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy*” (John 16: 16-20). Christ is promising a coming joy. Their grief will turn to joy because he will be back with them. That is the point to be kept in mind all through life, that joy is ours because Jesus Christ is with us. If joy comes to a couple who are being married, it is because they belong to one another till death. Their love, one for the other, is the cause of their joy. This is a sign, even in God’s own plan for man, of the love which he has for us, a love that is undying and always

faithful. The truest source of human joy is the knowledge of the love of God for us, and this is revealed, embodied, made present and given to us in the Person of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen from the dead. Whatever be our sorrows, if we are truly planted and grounded in the knowledge of the love of Jesus Christ, nothing will take away our joy to the very end. Come rack, come rope, joy will be ours, for *nothing can separate us from the love of God which is given us in Christ Jesus* (Rom 8:39).

At the Last Supper in his prayer to his heavenly Father, our Lord says that *eternal life is this, knowing you, Father, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent*. This means knowing the love of the Father and of the Son, a love personified and given in the Person of the Holy Spirit. Love is the foundation of joy, and God means us to possess joy amid our broken world, joy to the very end amid the suffering that is inevitable because of the world's sin. St Paul tells us to *rejoice in the Lord always! Again I say, rejoice!* he says (Philippians 4:4). Well then, let this joy fill our lives!

Second reflection: (Acts 18:1-8)

Persevering work St Paul had little success among the Athenians. So he left for Corinth, and there began trying to convince the Corinthians of the truth of the Gospel. He held debates in the synagogues (18:4), trying to convert Jews as well as Greeks. In Athens, the Greeks had laughed at him. In Corinth it seems that most of the Jews insulted him. Some did not, and even the president of the synagogue converted. Thus began the Christian community of Corinth — and we have two of St Paul's inspired Letters as one result. The Church of Corinth was due to the grace of God and Paul's persistence despite opposition and difficulty. We are reminded of Peter telling Christ, both before and after his resurrection, that they had *laboured all night and caught nothing*. At our Lord's word he cast out the net again and had a great catch. We must never allow weariness or a sense of futility to weaken our efforts on behalf of God in our daily work. We

never know when or how God intends that our work in life will have its intended effect.

The important thing is to strive to know what God wants us to do, and to do it as well as we can out of love for him. The sanctification of our daily work is critically important for our own sanctification and for the sanctification of others. We may then safely leave the result to him.



Friday of the Sixth week in Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Rev 5:9-10 You have redeemed us, Lord, by your Blood from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us into a kingdom, priests for our God, alleluia.

Collect O God, who restore us to eternal life in the Resurrection of Christ, raise us up, we pray, to the author of our salvation, who is seated at your right hand, so that, when our Saviour comes again in majesty, those you have given new birth in Baptism may be clothed with blessed immortality. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

In regions where the Solemnity of the Ascension is celebrated on the following Sunday:

Collect Hear our prayers, O Lord, so that what was promised by the sanctifying power of your Word may everywhere be accomplished through the working of the

Gospel and that all your adopted children may attain what the testimony of truth has foretold. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 18:9-18; Ps. 47:2-7; John 16:20-23

Jesus said to his disciples, I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. (John 16: 20-23)

Suffering In our Gospel today, our Lord warns his disciples that “*you will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy.*” So, suffering is coming to them. Let us for a moment consider the phenomenon of suffering in the

universe, so as to understand its presence more clearly in the human being. The pain experienced by an animal is not, of course, the same experience as that of a human being. Consider the pain of animals — their “suffering” as we might call it. Most accept that it is not right for animals to be made to suffer without proper cause, and in any case most understand that a needless infliction of pain on animals brutalizes society itself. That having been said, the pain of an animal is a radically different phenomenon from the suffering of man. Fundamentally, the animal is but matter. It is endowed with awareness and often of a high order, but lacks any spiritual element in its awareness. It has a power of self-generated activity, but is not free. It acts instinctively, and not freely, in response to what it is aware of. The animal has no self-awareness, properly so called, and is aware only of objects external to itself. It responds to these objects of its awareness according to instinct, and it must act in accord with its instinct. Its instinct is a great endowment, and it protects it against threats of pain. Importantly, the animal has no

consciousness of its being an independent Self or entity. When it is in pain it is not conscious of its own Self as in pain — it is just caught up in its pain. It is aware of the pain because it is paining, but not aware of its own Self as paining. This constitutes a profound difference between the suffering of animal and man. Man is above all aware of his being an independent Self with inherent dignity, able to choose his path. An important component of man's suffering is the fact that he is aware of his own Self precisely as suffering. Aware of the dignity of his own Self, he is aware that his suffering is contingent in the sense that, ultimately, it need not be. So his suffering, so undesirable, is all the more repulsive because he sees that his painful condition could be otherwise. Suffering debilitates his Self, it degrades him and leaves him ruined. The worst and most mysterious thing about the life of man is that he has to suffer. Suffering is repellent to him.

Of course, not all feel the revulsion towards the fact of suffering that some do. In his account of the history of his religious opinions (*Apologia* 1864), John Henry Newman

has a powerful passage on the effect on him of the sight of the evil and suffering of the world. *“I look out of myself into the world of men, and there I see a sight which fills me with unspeakable distress... I look into this living busy world, and see no reflexion of its Creator The sight of the world is nothing else than the prophet’s scroll, full of ‘lamentations, and mourning, and woe’”* (*Apologia pro Vita Sua*, ch.5, p.250). The general point here is that while all living things experience pain in the sense that they undergo trauma, attack and decline, in a superior sense it is man who truly “suffers.” Further, being conscious of the independent Self that he is, man is able to reflect on the fact of his suffering and on the higher purpose that his suffering may have. As man, he senses that this is part of his calling. He is called to suffer, and he senses that by suffering well, he will improve the world. He, then, can look on suffering in a different way to the rest of suffering creation. He need not simply endure it — he can see that it has its place in his work for a better world. He has the sense that, properly speaking, it has a higher place for his

Self than something to be merely endured. By his suffering he can be a better person, and by it he can make the world a better place. Within this perspective, let us consider our Lord's words in today's Gospel (John 16:20-23). *“Jesus said to his disciples, I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy.”* The greatest example of human suffering is that of Jesus Christ, and he embraced it as being the plan of God for the salvation of the world. By his sufferings he took away the sin of the world, and made it possible for all things to become new. He is the archetypal Man whose sufferings brought joy to the world. If we unite ourselves to him, our sufferings will, as St Paul writes, fill up what is lacking in his sufferings (Colossians 1:24). Thus by our sufferings we become co-redeemers with Christ the one and only Redeemer — with Mary his Mother being the foremost co-redeemer with him who is the only Redeemer.

Suffering is the worst thing about existence. But in another sense, it is the best thing about human existence,

because we have learnt from the example of the Suffering Man of the ages, Jesus Christ, that it is the principal path to goodness and the doing of good. Just as we are called to do good, so we are called to suffer. The key to it is to suffer with the Suffering Servant who bore the sin of the world through his obedient suffering. Let us then resolve to share in the sufferings of *Christ*, so as to share in his Resurrection. As our Lord says, *“Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.”*

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Second reflection: (Acts 18:9-18)

Human respect Many years ago in my youth, I knew a priest who repeatedly spoke to us about the dangers of human respect. I did not appreciate his point at the time because I was very young, but I have since come to see that it is a very great danger indeed. In our passage from The

Acts of the Apostles, our Lord says to St Paul in a vision: *“Do not be afraid to speak out.”* Of course, we must be prudent and weigh well the circumstances we are in. But all too often the only reason why we do not speak out in witness to our faith is because we fear what people will think, not of the faith, but of us. We fear that people will lose respect for us, or even despise us. This can even be the case within our own family circle or relations, or in our workplace environment, and certainly within circles of the Church itself. We can be governed by human respect.

Our Lord once said that if any man is ashamed of him before others, he will be ashamed of that man before his heavenly Father. Let us then pray for the courage and fortitude to bear daily witness to our faith, wherever there is a true opening. Let us not fear the loss of the good opinion of others.



Saturday of the Sixth week in Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Cf. 1 Pt 2:9 O chosen people, proclaim the mighty works of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light, alleluia.

Collect O God, whose Son, at his Ascension to the heavens, was pleased to promise the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, grant, we pray, that, just as they received manifold gifts of heavenly teaching, so on us, too, you may bestow spiritual gifts. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

In regions where the Solemnity of the Ascension is celebrated on the following Sunday:

Collect Constantly shape our minds, we pray, O Lord, by the practice of good works, that, trying always for what is better, we may strive to hold ever fast to the Paschal Mystery. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who

lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 18:23-28; Psalm 47:2-3, 8-10;
John 16:23b-28

Jesus said to his disciples, I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete. Though I have been speaking figuratively, a time is coming when I will no longer use this kind of language but will tell you plainly about my Father. In that day you will ask in my name. I am not saying that I will ask the Father on your behalf. No, the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father. (John 16:23b-28)

Reading Scripture I remember watching a documentary film which was a journalist's report of a Christian community somewhere in the United States. The

journalist was able to participate in the prayer meetings of the community and interview its members at will, including during some of its prayer sessions. One of the distinctive traits of this community was that it professed to take the word of God, as written in Scripture, seriously and on faith. It refused to water it down, or to explain it away. One feature of the sacred text which they had fastened on to was the promise of Jesus that miracles would be able to be worked by those who lived by faith. In particular, I remember, they took literally the promise of Christ to his disciples in Mark 16, not only that they were to go to the whole world and preach the Gospel, but that “*they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing it shall not hurt them*” (Mark 16:18). The film showed members of this community engaged in a form of dance while at prayer, but holding serpents as well. The serpents were venomous, and deadly. Of course, with the movement of those holding them, the serpents became the more agitated. The film showed one person being struck by the serpent he was holding and the bite immediately began to tell. The

venom was lethal and to the agitation of the journalist who was filming, the person just bitten began to fail. The journalist immediately called on others to assist and do something for the person who, in effect, was at the first stages of dying. The others did come to attend, but virtually refused to do anything about it because to do so would signal a lack of faith in the word and power of God. The man died before the eyes of all, and in full view of the filming — and all that those of the community who attended were prepared to say was that, well, it was a mystery. The Scripture could not be questioned, of course, so it was a mystery — and the mystery had to be accepted. They said this as the person was ending his life from snakebite. It was a tragic instance of religious “fundamentalism” — a narrow and totally inadequate notion of living by the fundamentals — in this case, faith alone and Scripture alone, *sola fide* and *sola scriptura*. In fact, they were imprisoned in their impossible notions.

“Jesus said to his disciples, I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until

now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete” (John 16:23b-28). These are strong, consoling and wondrous words. Does it mean that whatever we choose to ask for in Christ’s name, we shall be always granted? Sacred Scripture is the word of God, but still, this word has to be interpreted in the light of other ways in which God also makes his will known. To begin with, the word of God as expressed in one text must be interpreted in the light of other texts of the same Scriptures. When the devil tempted Christ at the very beginning of his public ministry, he took him to the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem and said to him, *“If you are the Son of God, cast yourself down from here”* — for as Scripture says, God’s angels will protect you entirely (Luke 4: 9-12). It was not unlike the suggestion that the one with faith take up serpents in his hands, for as Scripture says (as in Mark 16:18), believers will be able to do this. But our Lord replied to Satan, It is also written that you will not put God to any kind of test. One text of the Scriptures has to be interpreted in the light

of other texts too. Even taking a particular text, one must be careful lest one interprets the text hastily and superficially. When our Lord tells his disciples to go out taking “*no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff,*” as in Matthew 10:10, was Christ intending this directive for *all* times and places in the Church’s future? Common sense and the Church’s Tradition would immediately suggest otherwise. What we can say definitely is that he intended it at least for the time at which he said it. Christ wrote not a word to be handed on — but he did create his Church. The Church is Christ’s direct creation, and empowered to shepherd the flock in Christ’s name. Christ’s will and teaching is made known also in the Church’s life and Tradition. So there are other ways in which God makes his will known than in the mere text of Scripture, precious beyond words though that text be. This leads to a further point, that Nature too is the voice of God, for it is his creation — and reason and common sense is an aspect of Nature. Reason and common sense have a part to play in our understanding of what is revealed.

Let us live by the word of God. A principal channel of this divine word, this revealed truth, is Holy Scripture. It is not the only channel, though. God makes his word known to those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ his Son through Sacred Scripture, through the life and Tradition of his Church, and, to a point, through Nature that has come from his hand. It is the Church's guidance which enables us to interpret these channels of divine Revelation properly. Let us, then, who are children of the Church which is Christ's creation, look to her as our mother and guide.

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Second reflection: (Acts 18:23-28)

Apollos and his conversion Our passage today introduces us to the figure of Apollos — St Paul refers to him in one of his Letters. He must have been an important figure in the infant Church because St Paul says in that

Letter that some (of those to whom he was writing) were saying *I am for Paul*, others *I am for Cephas*, and others again, *I am for Apollos*. In our passage today (Acts 18:23-28) Apollos is described as an eloquent preacher with a sound knowledge of the Scriptures. However, though he preached accurately about Jesus, he did not have the fullness of the Church's message about him. So two members of the Church took an interest in him and gave him further instruction in the Catholic Faith. He went on to do great work for Christ and his Church.

Let us learn from this. There are plenty of good people who love our Lord, who have a certain knowledge of him, who speak of him eloquently, but who do not have the fullness of Catholic Faith and Truth. Let us befriend them as did the two who took an interest in Apollos and shared the Faith with him. They may go on to do great good as members of Christ's faithful.



Feast of the Ascension of the Lord

(Thursday or Sunday after the 6th Sunday of Easter)

At the Vigil Mass

Entrance Antiphon Ps 68 (67):33, 35 You kingdoms of the earth, sing to God; praise the Lord, who ascends above the highest heavens; his majesty and might are in the skies, alleluia.

Collect O God, whose Son today ascended to the heavens as the Apostles looked on, grant, we pray, that, in accordance with his promise, we may be worthy for him to live with us always on earth, and we with him in heaven. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

At the Mass during the Day

Entrance Antiphon Acts 1:11 Men of Galilee, why gaze in wonder at the heavens? This Jesus whom you saw

ascending into heaven will return as you saw him go, alleluia.

Collect Gladden us with holy joys, almighty God, and make us rejoice with devout thanksgiving, for the Ascension of Christ your Son is our exaltation, and, where the Head has gone before in glory, the Body is called to follow in hope. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Or:

Grant, we pray, almighty God, that we, who believe that your Only Begotten Son, our Redeemer, ascended this day to the heavens, may in spirit dwell already in heavenly realms. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 46;
Ephesians 1:17-23; Matthew 28:16-20

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. Then they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.
(Matthew 28:16-20)

The exaltation of Christ Today we think of our Lord ascending into heaven, to take his seat at the right hand of his heavenly Father. His Ascension crowned forty days in his risen life that had been marked by many appearances in the flesh to his disciples. As St Luke tells us, *“He had shown himself alive to them after his Passion by many demonstrations: for forty days he had continued to appear to them and tell them about the kingdom of God. When he had been at table with them, he had told them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for what the Father*

had promised.” There in Jerusalem, on Pentecost, they would be filled with the Holy Spirit. During this period of forty days prior to his Ascension, the almighty power of God was manifested in him. During his public ministry he had shown great power in his miracles. His power was shown in a different way in his Passion and Death — in his endurance to the limits of weakness and degradation. Now his disciples beheld before them the spectacle of One who was beyond the reach of suffering and death, in whom the power of God was operative as never before. In him God had conquered death, Satan, evil, sin, everything. In fact, our Lord told them that the whole power and authority of God in heaven and on earth had actually been given to him. Risen from the dead, and possessed of the fullness of the divine power, he was manifestly God almighty — though he was not, of course, the Father. When Thomas saw him at last, he bowed down before him and said to him, my Lord and my God. When our Lord ascended into heaven, with his disciples watching, he was showing in a visual manner that his power and his position was equal to that of

almighty God. He ascended into heaven to the acclaim of the highest heavens, there to sit at the right hand of his heavenly Father. In fact, he had promised this even in the presence of his enemies. In his Gospel, Luke narrates that at his trial during his Passion, our Lord told the Sanhedrin that *“Hereafter, the Son of Man will sit on the right hand of the power of God.”* They knew what this implied, so they asked him directly — for then they would be able to pass his death-sentence — *“Are you, then, the Son of God?”* Yes, *“You say that I am.”* At that, they took him straight to Pilate for sentencing by crucifixion (Luke 22: 69-71).

St Paul writes of the Ascension in terms of the power of God. The strength of God’s power was seen at work in Christ *“when he used it to raise him from the dead and to make him sit at his right hand, in heaven, far above every Sovereignty, Authority, Power or Domination, or any other name that can be named, not only in this age but in the age to come”* (Ephesians 1:20-21). He also refers to God handing all his power over to him as man: *“He has put all things under his feet, and made him as the ruler of*

everything, the head of the Church; which is his body, the fullness of him who fills the whole creation” (Ephesians 1:22). The Ascension of our Lord into heaven shows that though Jesus is man and one of us, he is the highest of the highest, equal to God the Father — because he is God. The Ascension is a manifestation of who Jesus our Redeemer really is, and where he now is. The Gospel of St John does not refer to the Ascension in the manner in which it is described in the Synoptic Gospels. But St John does climax his Gospel with the acknowledgment by Thomas of Christ’s divinity. He is equal to Yahweh — in fact, he is Yahweh. *“My Lord and my God!”* Thomas says. It is a recognition of Christ’s exaltation. It is, in effect, a recognition by Thomas of Christ’s having ascended to the right hand of God, which John implies when, on the morning of the Resurrection, our Lord says that he is ascending to his Father: *“I am ascending to my Father and your Father, my God and your God”* (John 20:17). Our Brother and Redeemer is at the Father’s right hand as his very equal, to be our Brother still, interceding for us

directly with the Father. He is our Lord and our God. Let us remember that all this happened by the power of the Holy Spirit. Our Lord became man in the first place by the power of the Holy Spirit. He exercised his ministry by the power of the Holy Spirit. He offered himself up on the cross as Victim by the power of the Holy Spirit. He was raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit, and he ascended to the right hand of the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Ascension manifests not only the divinity of Jesus Christ and his equality with the Father, but also the activity and power of the Holy Spirit, who would be sent to the infant Church soon after.

Today as we think of our Lord ascending into heaven, let us think of his unique and exalted position. He is not simply a great religious founder, nor simply the greatest of them. He is our Brother, our Redeemer and our God, there at the right hand of the Father continually representing us. From his exaltation he pours into our hearts a share in his own divine Spirit. By the gift of his Holy Spirit we are enabled to follow him closely and to be gradually

transformed into his image at the deepest level of our being. Let us then take up the work of seeking sanctity by the close following of the Master, who is ascended into heaven and seated at the right hand of God.



Seventh Sunday of Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 27 (26):7-9 O Lord, hear my voice, for I have called to you; of you my heart has spoken: Seek his face; hide not your face from me, alleluia.

Collect Graciously hear our supplications, O Lord, so that we, who believe that the Saviour of the human race is with you in your glory, may experience, as he promised, until the end of the world, his abiding presence among us. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts of the Apostles 1:12-14; Psalm 26;
1 Peter 1:13-16; John 17:1-11

After Jesus said this, he looked towards heaven and prayed: Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you

have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began. I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name — the name you gave me — so that they may be one as we are one. (John 17:1-11)

Glory I remember when I was teaching a religion class in one large state secondary school at about the time of my ordination, a girl in front of me put up her

hand and said, “Life is a bitch!” As far as that young teenager was concerned, life was not something to be excited about. It was messy, difficult, disappointing and certainly not beautiful. It was “a bitch”. I understood what she was saying, and I wonder how she got on — she would have experienced a lot more of life by now. Specifically, I wonder if she gained and then remained in religious faith. The world contains so much evil together with so much good — but the good can be lost from view because of the evil. A tsunami sweeps all away, and it is to be expected that those affected will not remember the good things that are around. The problem of evil is the most serious problem of life, and it is a significant objection to the existence of God. I remember watching an interview with Peter Singer, the Australian utilitarian professor of a chair of philosophy at Princeton. If there were a God, he would have done a better job of things, Singer opined. The great defender of dogmatic religion in 19th century England, John Henry Newman, now beatified, wrote that were it not for the unavoidable and unconquerable testimony of his

conscience to a living and holy God, the evils of the world would make of him an atheist, agnostic or a polytheist. This statement alone cautions us against being glib about the difficulties for religious belief posed by suffering and evil. One of Saint Thomas Aquinas's acknowledged objections to belief in the existence of God is the problem of evil. So it is that things can get so bad that one can wish that one had not been born and that there had not been a world anyway. Now, we could go on and on discussing the matter by recourse to reasons that occur to us, trying to see on the basis of natural considerations that evil does not negate the fact of God. What I wish to do here, though, is simply highlight what is obvious — that life is not a pretty picture. More than this, we can come to assume that *ultimately* reality and life is bleak and hardly worth doing much about. The best thing is to get what you can out of it and try to be content in your discontent. This is one reason why the inspired Book of Ecclesiastes is valuable. It can teach us what life will seem to be like if we go on mere

appearances. All is “vanity of vanities” – that is, there is no real glory or beauty or value.

There is no glory? Life is a bitch? Now, there are, and have been, plenty of people who do get excited, indeed passionate, about the possibilities of life. Many have thought that there can be glory in this life — Karl Marx was passionate about life, as was his friend Engels, as was their disciple Vladimir Lenin. Hitler was passionate about the possibilities — as, sadly, he and they saw them to be. The glory they saw was the glory of *this world* and of Man. That is to say, this world and Man could be made glorious if *their* proposed paths were followed and *their* gospel propagated. Their god of glory was an image of this world, if only they could get people to accept the image and get on with putting it into effect. But of course it has repeatedly fallen to pieces amid untold blood and suffering, leaving countless people to think that life indeed is “a bitch.” Thus they think that if there were a God he would have done a better job of it. This difficulty in making sense of life, this difficulty in finding the glory for which man yearns, and

which, deep down, he senses is to be found somewhere, ought lead him to turn to divine Revelation. For God has intervened in this besmirched yet beautiful world and has revealed *his* glory. He has shown to man a great fact, that the sustaining Source and final End of all reality is pure and utter glory. The world comes forth from Glory, and its intended term is Glory. Indeed, when man came forth from the creative hand of God, he was endowed with glory. He was made in the image of God rather than in the image of other creatures. There was to be no death for him, and he was made integral in nature and endowed with grace. But he sinned and lost his glory, and death passed to the race. But that did not stop God. He was determined to restore man to glory, and so the Son, the Lord of glory, became as men are and lowlier still, even to death. With that, God raised him up and gave to him the name above all other names. In his humanity he gained supreme glory, and became the means for us to share in his glory. This brings us to our Gospel passage today (John 17: 1-11), in which our Lord addresses the Father and refers to *the glory* that

was his and which he has brought to us. *“I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.”*

Life is not a bitch — not at all, for the world has Jesus Christ, living and risen from the dead. *“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us. And we saw his glory, glory as of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth”* (John 1: 14). At the wedding feast of Cana in Galilee, Jesus worked the first of his signs and manifested his glory — and his disciples believed in him. When conversing with the two disciples on the way to Emmaus on the morning of his resurrection from the dead, our Lord said to them, *“Did not the Christ have to suffer these things before entering into his glory?”* (Luke 24:26). The world comes forth from Glory, and finds its end in Glory. We are meant for Glory, and Jesus is the Way to it. Let us take our stand by him, for *he* is our life, our light and *our glory*.



Monday of the Seventh week of Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Acts 1:8 You will receive the power of the Holy Spirit coming upon you, and you will be my witnesses, even to the ends of the earth, alleluia.

Collect May the power of the Holy Spirit come to us, we pray, O Lord, that we may keep your will faithfully in mind and express it in a devout way of life. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 19:1-8; Psalm 68:2-7ab;

John 16:29-33

The disciples said to Jesus, Now you are speaking clearly and without figures of speech. Now we can see that you know all things and that you do not even need to have anyone ask you questions. This makes us believe that you came from God. You believe at last! Jesus answered. But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all

alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me. I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world. (John 16:29-33)

Knowing all No-one ever, at the time of Abraham himself or at any point thereafter, thought that Abraham knew all things. Such an idea, for all our veneration for that great father of ours in faith, would be laughable. There was a great deal in his life that profoundly perplexed him, but he went forward as a hero of faith in God's word to him. Similarly, none of the Patriarchs ever was thought of as knowing all things. When Moses was commanded by God to return to Pharaoh and direct that he be allowed to take his people out, he had no idea how to do this. He would have to be led by God. Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the minor prophets such as Hosea, and the Maccabees — none of the great and holy persons of the Old Testament were such as to be said to know all things. They would all have responded, as would have the entire

chosen people, that God alone knows all things. None of the great philosophers of classical times would have claimed to know all things, and no person would have claimed that they did. I suppose the nearest notion in classical philosophy to One who has knowledge of all things is Aristotle's *Pure Act* — a principle explaining a moving, changing universe — who is intellect and self-thinking thought. If we take any of the great founders of the religions of man — say, Mahomet, or Buddha, or Zoroaster, or Confucius (if he can be regarded as properly religious) — there has never been any claim that any one of these persons knew all things. Take any of the greatest of thinkers, be they philosophers, theologians, whatever — say, St Albert the Great who was great because of his encyclopaedic knowledge — never is such a claim made of any of them. This is almost self-evident. Ah! but there is one exception, and it appears in our Gospel today. The disciples say to our Lord: “*Now we can see that you know all things and that you do not even need to have anyone ask you questions*” (John 16:29 33). Jesus Christ knew all

things — any positive judgment he made, and any positive teaching he gave, was utterly free of any error. This was because he was divine, and it revealed that he was divine.

Of course, there are aspects of the Incarnation which make Christ's omniscience and inerrancy difficult to grasp, perhaps even impossible. He was truly man, and therefore there is a true sense in which *he grew in knowledge*. St Luke specifically tells us that "*Jesus increased in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and man*" (Luke 2:52). So, in his human nature and character, as a twelve year-old he had greater "wisdom" than he had as a two year-old. We can pin-point certain occasions in the Gospel when our Lord was content to remain in a certain "ignorance," as we might call it, of some things. For instance, when he was making his way to the synagogue official's house to heal his daughter, a woman silently amid the pressing crowds touched his garment and was cured. Instantly our Lord stopped, and asked who touched him. Mysteriously, he was fully aware that he had healed someone, but was content humanly to be in ignorance of *who* it was and to

seek that information in usual ways. That is to say, he was content to learn the facts of the case in a human fashion — by asking about it. But he was not in any positive error about it. He made no positively erroneous judgment. In respect to anything Christ *intended* to know, judge or teach, he was never *in error* and could never be in error. In such a case, it was a divine Person who intended to know, judge or teach something. Supremely was this the case in respect to anything directly or indirectly to do with his proper mission, which was to redeem the world from sin and reconcile it to God. For instance, I have come across statements which speak of Christ “*losing his life*” — that he was finally arrested and executed, and that circumstances overtook him. This is profoundly erroneous, and the Gospels take pains to show the full foreknowledge of Jesus Christ and his personal choice in submitting to his death for the salvation of the world. It is all an aspect of his omniscience, a quality proper to God alone. As the disciples make clear, at the Last Supper they had a glimpse of Christ’s divine omniscience — he knew all things.

There is this too — that the unique profundity of the mysteries of Christianity, with their origin in Jesus Christ, shows his omniscience. There has been one Person in history who has known all things, and that Person is Jesus of Nazareth.

Let us, though, bring this down to the concrete reality of each of us. Christ's omniscience, his knowing all things, means that *he knows all things about me*. I can trust him. He knows everything. Everything is in his hands. He knows where I have come from, he has known me from all eternity, and has chosen me from all eternity. He has his plan for me, and has a place allotted for me in heaven. How terrible it would be not to reach that place! Let each of us trust him, then. Let each of us resolve to know, love and serve him here on earth so as to see and enjoy him forever in heaven.

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Second reflection: (John 16:29-33)

Be brave! There are many things that can depress us in life and lead us to abandon difficult work. That difficult work could be work on ourselves and on our defects. It could be the work of our profession or workplace. It could be the work entailed in being part of the family we have, or the wider family circle. If we intend to complete well the work we have been given in life, there will be difficulties. Our Lord tells us that we are to be brave before difficulties, and he assures us that he has conquered the world. This victory was manifest in his rising from the dead — which is what we celebrate in the Easter season. Thus risen, nothing now could touch him, for all authority in heaven and on earth was his. In taking up our tasks of each day — which should be a participation in Christ's mission according to the vocation God has given us — we ought be filled with the awareness that Christ our Leader has won the victory. So, now I begin!



Tuesday of the Seventh week in Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Rev 1:17-18 I am the first and the last, I was dead and am now alive. Behold, I am alive for ever and ever, alleluia.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty and merciful God, that the Holy Spirit, coming near and dwelling graciously within us, may make of us a perfect temple of his glory. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 20:17-27; Psalm 68:10-11, 20-21;
John 17:1-11a

After Jesus said this, he looked towards heaven and prayed: Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all mankind that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you

have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began. I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. (John 17:1-11a)

The glory of God One of the most notable gains of modern civilization, largely due to the intellectual drive of the West, is the general mastery of *facts*. The interest of modern man is in *facts*, and his strength is in knowing them. He wants to know the reality of things, and to

distinguish this sharply from imaginative depictions of reality — as in, say, myths. The roots of this intellectual and cultural bent lie, we could say, in Greek philosophy and empirical observation piercing beyond what is mythic to what really is the case — the instrument being the reason and senses rather than the imagination. It is also due to the assertion of Judaeo-Christian revelation that the world is not the arbitrary plaything of the gods, but is the creation of the one God who in creating, embeds laws. The world is rational and has the stability of law, thus making it open to investigation. By contrast, man has usually thought in myths rather than in a strictly rational fashion. The world used to be explained imaginatively rather than scientifically. There are advantages in both. Myth will typically express a world view whereas a scientific approach is in danger of having no world view. Be all this as it may, the point I wish to emphasise here is that the modern mind, borne along by the Western emphasis, is interested in hard *facts*. It is empirical, and tends to confine reality to that which can be tested empirically. It

discounts myth — but as just said, this can easily result in a lack of any perception of objective meaning in the facts of life and the universe. All that is seen in life and the world are simply facts, and the facts are not perceived as carrying any special meaning. You make what you *can* of it, and more importantly, what you *choose* to make of it. You also make of *yourself* what you like. We see a form of this in the thought of Jean-Paul Satre, who spoke of man as being “condemned to be free.” Since there is no Creator, there is no objective “plan” for man. Man has no objective “essence” which could be said to precede, at least in idea, his existence. That is to say, there is no specific human nature — each man is fully responsible for, and free to construct, the kind of being that he becomes. The basic thing is that he exists — his *essence* is his own creation. This “existentialism” is, I think, a derivative of an exclusive emphasis on *mere* facts. Any meaning man chooses to give to them is the result of his own *choice*. The world as such does not contain “meaning.” All this is one serious downside of the discounting of “myth.”

A philosophy such as that of Satre is profoundly revolting. We demand to know the objective meaning of things, and refuse to think that fundamentally and in principle all there is, is the mere existence of things. There are not just facts, the facts before us on which we impose whatever meaning we choose. We are convinced that the world has some objective meaning, some purpose, an objective nature, which if allowed to flourish will bring fulfilment to all. This conviction that there is real and objective meaning to life leads man to ask, what is the purpose of things? — which is to ask more than what is the purpose of just my own life. We wonder what is the purpose of the world, of the universe, of all things, be they seen or unseen. This is not merely an intellectual question, for we experience within ourselves a constant sense of obligation to do what is objectively right and good. If my marriage has an objective purpose and meaning, and not simply one that I decide for it, then this objective fact will profoundly affect what I perceive to be my moral obligations. All this is to say that my conscience will be

shaped by what I perceive to be (or, by contrast, what I arbitrarily choose to be) the meaning of things. Well, into all this questioning comes the Good News of Divine Revelation. God has revealed the meaning of the universe, of my own life, and of all things that are, be they seen and unseen. The *meaning* of it all is that God *may be honoured and glorified*. The *purpose* of everything is the glory of God — that he be honoured and glorified. It is this to which our Lord refers in our Gospel today, which is drawn from his great prayer to his heavenly Father, offered up during the Last Supper and reported for us in the Gospel of St John (John 17:1-11a). Christ prays that the Father will glorify him, so that he may glorify the Father: “*After Jesus said this, he looked towards heaven and prayed: Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you.*” Our Lord continues, “*I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.*” The purpose of creation is to give glory to God. The sin of man was a

great refusal to give him glory, and the Son of God became man to reverse this and to render perfect glory to God on our behalf. And there we have the meaning of things.

The meaning of life, the meaning of the world, the meaning of all things be they seen or unseen, is to give glory to God. St Ignatius Loyola coined a famous phrase that sums up the quest for goodness, which is the moral imperative perceived by the conscience. That phrase was, “For the greater glory of God”: *Ad maiorem Dei gloriam*. Ignatius goes further than, “For the glory of God.” Rather, his wording is, “For the *greater* glory of God.” Our lives, founded on the love that God has for us, ought be impelled by a loving desire to give greater and greater glory to God by following more and more generously in the footsteps of Jesus Christ his Son. *Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit! As it was in the beginning, is now, and forever!*

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Second reflection: (Acts 20:17-27)

Being led by the Holy Spirit When our Lord spoke to his disciples at the Last Supper about the coming of the Holy Spirit, it was obvious from his very language that the Holy Spirit would deal with them as would a real Person, and not just as some force. He would be their defender, their teacher, their Sanctifier, the one who would bear witness to Jesus and who would help them to bear witness to Jesus. We who have received the Holy Spirit all too often fail to treat Him as a real Person. We carry on as if he was not around, and not within us. But as we read in The Acts of the Apostles, he was very active and personal in leading the Church's members in the work of evangelisation and in how and where to evangelise. In today's passage from The Acts, St Paul tells the Christians of Ephesus that *"the Holy Spirit, in town after town, has made it clear enough that imprisonment and persecution await me."*

As a first step in being guided by the Holy Spirit, we ought consciously advert to the fact that he dwells within us if we are in the state of grace. Then we ought cultivate a personal devotion to him, trying to be sensitive to his promptings, especially in our conscience.



Wednesday of the Seventh week in Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Ps 47 (46):2 All peoples, clap your hands. Cry to God with shouts of joy, alleluia.

Collect Graciously grant to your Church, O merciful God, that, gathered by the Holy Spirit, she may be devoted to you with all her heart and united in purity of intent. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 20:28-38; Psalm 68:29-30, 33-36ab;
John 17:11b-19

Jesus raised his eyes to heaven and said, Holy Father, keep true to your name those you have given to me so that they may be one as we are one. While I was with them I kept true to your name those whom you gave me. I have watched over them so that none has been lost except the son of perdition, in fulfilment of the Scriptures. I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in

the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I dedicate myself, that they too may be dedicated in the truth.
(John 17:11b-19)

The Truth There are many things that man lives by in his desire for happiness. That is to say, there are many things he needs if he is to flourish. He has to have material means, and so he must work for his living. He needs to be able to work in order to gain the food, clothing and shelter he needs for himself and those whom he loves. He needs friends — it is a serious business if he loses all his friends by death, or by their turning away from him. When Christ announced the doctrine of the Eucharist in the Synagogue of Capernaum, many of his disciples left him

— he lost a lot of friends. One of his closest companions, one of the Twelve, turned away from him eventually to hand him over to his enemies. It caused profound sorrow of soul to our Lord. Another need of man if he is to flourish is education — he certainly needs to be educated sufficiently to have the knowledge he needs for life. In a sense, some of these needs are those of the animal world too — they are not distinctive to man except in their distinctive nature and form. An animal needs to be able to “work” — using the word *analogously*. That is to say, it needs to be able to take steps and act in order to gain its sustenance and build its shelter. It needs its “friends” — wild dogs live in packs, lions live in their prides, wild buffalo, elephants and other species of animals roam in their herds, birds fly in their flocks. Some animals and birds do not, but generally there is some parallel in their existence to nature’s need for bonding and company. It is a dim reflection or imprint of the Trinitarian life of the Creator. However, there is a need that is absolutely distinct to man, a need that distinguishes him from all other living

things that share needs with him — and that need is for *the truth*. Man needs the “truth” if he is to flourish in his best self. He needs to *seek* the truth and he needs in important respects to *know* it. It is no surprise that our Lord, the Saviour of the world, described *himself* as the Truth — *I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life*, he said. He described his mission in this world in terms of the Truth: *for this was I born*, he told Pilate, *to bear witness to the Truth, and those who are of the Truth listen to my voice*.

One of the things which the Gospel of St John reports, and which without that Gospel we may never have known, is that our Lord placed the “Truth” at the centre of his message and his preaching. Truth came from him, and John, the author of the Gospel, learnt the message well. I have not researched a comparison between the Johannine notion of “truth” — which is to say, Christ’s use of this term as in the Gospel of St John — and the notion of truth in Classical thought. While Greek philosophy understood itself as a love for wisdom or truth, I suspect that one difference between its notion, and the notion of “truth” in

Christ's teaching, is that the latter had an essentially *moral* bearing. That is to say, the "truth" in Christian revelation has a sovereignty over man. Man feels imperiously called by his conscience to seek the truth, and when he discovers it, he feels bound to submit to its demands. It is a very *moral* matter. Yet all the while he is aware that he is free. He is obligated to seek and submit to the truth, and yet paradoxically there is no necessity compelling him to do so. I doubt that this moral sovereignty of truth was perceived to be the case in Classical thought — at least not to the extent that it is in Christ's teaching and in Christian thought. Further, not only is man subject to the truth by the law of his conscience, but the truth is life-giving when he does so submit. He flourishes when he freely submits to the truth, and lives by it. I suspect that in Classical thought, there was lacking a sense that there had to be a thoroughgoing and profoundly *moral* submission to the truth. For Classical thought, seeking the truth was a grand adventure, and something of a conquest when attained. It was a personal accomplishment, an attainment, and even

something of a sport, with philosophy degenerating at times into a cultural pastime. In the teaching of Jesus Christ, the Truth was a source not only of deep intellectual satisfaction and even practical use as in technology, but of moral worth — provided the subject bowed before it and not merely conquered it. The Truth would make him good, and, yes, it could sanctify him. The principal reason for this is that in the Christian revelation the Truth stood forth not as an abstraction, not as a principle of reality as comprehended by the human mind, but as a living, concrete Person. *Christ is the Truth.*

In our Gospel today (John 17:11b-19), our Lord prays to his heavenly Father asking that he “sanctify” his disciples by the truth. *“Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I dedicate myself, that they too may be dedicated in the truth.”* The truth is the word of God, and Jesus Christ is that Word become flesh. He is the Truth, as he is the Way and the Life. Ultimately the Truth is very concrete: it is God, and specifically, Jesus Christ.

Eternal life is to know the Father, and Jesus Christ whom he sent. It is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, who takes us to this Truth. Let us live by it, then!

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Second reflection: (Acts 20:28-38)

Be on guard In the history of Christianity heresy has loomed large from the beginning. During the 2000 years of the Church's history there have been periods when heresy has dominated the life of the Church. The fourth century of the Church, so wracked by the heresy of Arius, spawned vast sects even beyond the Church. Other heresies and schisms saw the light of day, and so it has been down the centuries. A sad feature of this has been that many heresies have arisen from the rebellion of the Church's clergy. We think of Arius, Wycliffe, Huss, Luther – Catholic clergy all, and many others. St Paul speaks of this in today's first reading from The Acts of the

Apostles. Addressing the elders of the church of Ephesus, he warns that *“even from your own ranks there will be men coming forward with a travesty of the truth on their lips to induce the disciples to follow them.”* To the elders, St Paul gives the remedy: *“Be on your guard for yourselves and for all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you the overseers, to feed the Church of God which he bought with his own blood.”*

Let us be on our guard against any travesty of the truth. We must listen to the teaching of the Church, especially as given by the Successor of St Peter. Let us love him, pray for him, and above all listen to him and be moulded by his guidance and his teaching.



Thursday of the Seventh week in Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Hebrews 4:16 With boldness let us approach the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace as a timely help, alleluia.

Collect May your Spirit, O Lord, we pray, imbue us powerfully with spiritual gifts, that he may give us a mind pleasing to you and graciously conform us to your will. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 22:30; 23:6-11; Ps. 16:1-2a ,5, 7-11;

John 17:20-26

Jesus prayed, My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as

we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them. (John 17:20-26)

Unity

In February 2007, the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney — an intelligent and learned man — was interviewed on Australian ABC Television by Kerry O'Brien. The topic of discussion was unity with the See of Rome. It was occasioned by a *London Times* news report that the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches were close to embracing a proposal for unity. This hearsay was based on what was rumoured to be the contents of a report from the International Anglican Roman Catholic Commission

for Unity and Mission, a body formed some years earlier. The report proposed, the gossip went, a number of measures that would set the Anglican Church on the path towards unity with the Catholic Church under the Pope. Despite this speculation being discounted by senior officials of the Commission, the media talk continued because of *The London Times* report. What was interesting was the Archbishop's views on Christian unity. He could never imagine a day, this side of Heaven, when the two Churches would be united as one Church — in Heaven they would be, but not before. This was because, he declared, Churches are “*just big institutions, denominations.*” These big institutions are not “*the real Church. There's one real Church that all Christians now belong to and although there is some use in, perhaps, denominational mergers from time to time, I don't really see any need for the churches to unite in that way.*” He went on to say that it is impossible that the Anglican Church accept one central authority, the Pope — and this is because there is one head of the Church, and that head is

Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the head, not the Pope — and that is why a merger is impossible. All such discussion is a complete waste of time. He would prefer to say to Catholics: you become Anglicans! *“We do have one central authority, that’s the Bible. What we have is a lot of people who interpret the Bible, which is perfectly right. Each of us is accountable for interpreting the Bible. That’s our central authority. Now, that is the way that God rules his Church. That leads to all sorts of differences of opinion. It is called Protestantism, and I’m actually in favour of it. I think it’s a good thing in the modern world.”*

Let us leave aside the question of the Archbishop’s theology of the Church and the Bible, and the likelihood and possibility of a sacred Book being the “central authority” whereby God could rule his Church. The Archbishop immediately allowed that such a system (which he liked and thought good) leads to all sorts of differences of opinion — and he did not seem to set any limits to the possible differences. Let us simply observe, what he admitted, that this obviously excludes the

possibility of a visible Christian unity this side of the grave. All that is possible is the personal, private acknowledgment of Jesus Christ as one's "head" and as the "head of the Church," together with a personal set of opinions as to what he has revealed — a body of views which various others who also acknowledge Christ as "head of the Church" may or may not agree with. When it comes down to it, the Christian unity for which Christ prayed so ardently, so openly, so explicitly, is an impossible dream, like the dream of Don Quixote. But further, unity is impossible not merely because the differences of conscientious opinion are insuperable, but because it was not the divine plan anyway. But the Gospel text shows that this view must be wrong. Christ prayed for a visible unity, a unity of Church, embracing all his disciples. If we wish to understand Christ's vision for his Church and how we are to interpret his prayer, let us consider the body he actually founded. Did he permit, or encourage a situation involving firstly his own Twelve — and then as well as this, other bodies of disciples with their

own notions and plans, operating *apart* from the Twelve? The idea is absurd. The infant Church was united around the Twelve, with Mary the mother of Christ in their midst. Peter was the Rock on which Christ declared that he would build his Church. Christ founded but one Church. This was what came into being at Pentecost with the structure our Lord had given to it by divine intention. But the inherent and ever-imminent danger was of disunity. As Christ's prayer makes abundantly clear, division and disunity make it difficult to bring the world to believe that he came from God (John 17:20-26).

The will of Jesus Christ is that all his disciples be one in a visible unity, a unity that is seen by the world, a unity which when seen, will convince the world that the Father sent him, and that the Father has loved us, even as he has loved Jesus himself. The very mission of Jesus Christ, a mission passed on to the Apostles on the evening of the day he rose from the dead, requires that we strive to do our best to move forward Christian unity. Let us entrust to the

power of the Holy Spirit the impossible task that this appears to constitute, for all things are possible to God.

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Second reflection: (Acts 22:30; 23:6-11)

The Christian sense of humour A sense of humour is important in both human life and in the Christian life. I am sure that our Lord himself often displayed a sense of humour. On one occasion he told his hearers not to be intent on getting the *splinter* out of their brother's eye when they have a *plank* already in their own. I presume that metaphor brought on peals of laughter, with our Lord smiling as he said it. In our passage today from The Acts (23:6-11), St Luke tells us that when Paul was placed by the tribune virtually on trial before the members of the Sanhedrin he, Paul, saw that it was made up of Sadducees and Pharisees. These two groups held opposite views on the matter of the resurrection. Turning this to his advantage, he announced that it was because of the hope of the resurrection that he was on trial. This provoked a

heated debate between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and Paul ended up being defended by the Pharisees as having possibly received a revelation from an angel on the matter! The scene is an amusing one to imagine, and it must have caused amusement when St Paul related it to his friends over the years. It is not the only example in that inspired work of a humorous perspective on situations.

In the course of life there are numerous difficulties in the path of the Christian, indeed of any person. The memory of injustices can be allowed to engulf one's vision of life, and this will be profoundly debilitating. What will greatly assist is the development of the power to stand back and view another side — what we might call the amusing side of situations of difficulty. It is a habit of mind which can be fostered by repeated attempts. The load will then be lighter, and one's strength will be preserved for higher trials. Let the Christian cultivate a sense of humour, especially in moments of difficulty.



Friday of the Seventh week in Eastertide

Entrance Antiphon Rev 1:5-6 Christ loved us and washed us clean of our sins by his Blood, and made us into a kingdom, priests for his God and Father, alleluia.

Collect O God, who by the glorification of your Christ and the light of the Holy Spirit have unlocked for us the gates of eternity, grant, we pray, that, partaking of so great a gift, our devotion may grow deeper and our faith be strengthened. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 25:13b-21; Psalm 103:1-2, 11-12, 19-20ab; John 21:15-19

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these? Yes, Lord, he said, you know that I love you. Jesus said, Feed my lambs. Again Jesus said, Simon son of John, do you truly love me? He answered, Yes, Lord, you know

that I love you. Jesus said, Take care of my sheep. The third time he said to him, Simon son of John, do you love me? Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, Do you love me? He said, Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you. Jesus said, Feed my sheep. I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go. Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, Follow me! (John 21:15-19)

Christ wants our love One of the most astonishing features of the Christian religion is that man finds himself seated with his Lord and God, who is asking for his love. But commonly we take all this for granted. God treats man with an extraordinary dignity, and our Gospel today portrays this. The group of Apostles — John gives us the names of some of them — have been out fishing all night. They caught nothing, but then as dawn was breaking Jesus called to them from the shore, directing them to a huge

catch. At this, they made their way to the shore, Simon Peter leading the way as he hurried ahead in the water. On the shore, Jesus had prepared breakfast for them. Jesus! We ought never get used to the thought of Jesus. Our Lord once said during his public ministry that a prophet is never without honour *except in his own country* — in other words, that familiarity all too easily leads to contempt. We can get very used to the thought of Jesus, and Jesus can become a mere thought rather than the living, divine Person that he is. There he was, on the shore, with breakfast prepared for his friends. He was man, man just as much as they, but in the first instance he was divine. He was a divine Person, and in him *dwelt the fullness of the godhead bodily*. The entire divine Being was present in this man Jesus of Nazareth, which is to say that he was the great God himself. There was nothing of the Being of God which was not present and to be found in the Person of Jesus — which is not to say that he was the only Person who was God. He was not the Father, nor was he the Holy Spirit — he was the Son. But his was the fullness of the

divine Being, and in gazing on this Man a person gazed on the living God. He was the Jewel of the universe, in his divinity boundlessly transcending the universe in wealth of being. There he was, on the shore, early in the morning, cooking fish for breakfast on a charcoal fire. As said at the beginning, one of the astonishing features of the Christian religion is that man finds himself seated with his God, who asks for his love. In Jesus Christ, God asks Simon if he loves him. He asks it three times, and makes it clear to Peter that this is how he is to view his future life.

We can appreciate this a little more when we think of the great concourse of men and women in history who have not known Jesus Christ, or knowing of him, have not understood that he is the living God. If one is intelligent and well-educated, one may visualize the Ultimate in terms of pure Actuality without any need or possibility of change. The Ultimate is boundless Being. Such a view — exalted and philosophically correct — would scarcely capture the heart and affections of man. Nor does it involve a radically different *relationship* with the Ultimate, in that God is still

remote. Very often, outside of the Judeo-Christian revelation and those religions profoundly influenced by it (such as Islam), God is perceived as distant — and this is to be expected because of his utter transcendence. Various devices are employed to overcome this distance, and the multitude of religious rites and myths bear witness to man's yearning for communion with whatever is the Beyond, whatever is the Explanation, whatever is the Source, whatever is the final End. But God has answered the quest of man by being discovered in his midst as one of themselves, though transcendent still. There he is on the shore, among a few of his friends, risen from the dead, having gone through the great redemptive trial, the like of which has never been experienced by any other. There he is on the shore! He, the one God before whom all other "gods" are nothing, converses with his creatures with respect and love. He has become man, has suffered for all his brothers and sisters of human history, and he asks us one by one for our love. Receiving the promise of love, he gives a share in his work. *"When they had finished eating,*

Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these? Yes, Lord, he said, you know that I love you. Jesus said, Feed my lambs. Again Jesus said, Simon son of John, do you truly love me? He answered, Yes, Lord, you know that I love you. Jesus said, Take care of my sheep. The third time he said to him, Simon son of John, do you love me? Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, Do you love me? He said, Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you. Jesus said, Feed my sheep” (John 21:15-19).

Every day in the life of each one of us, Jesus Christ, true God and true man, our Brother and our Redeemer, asks us if we truly love him. This is the one thing which he desires of us, that we love him who is our God. It is to be a love that accepts totally what he has revealed. It is a love that accepts totally the Church he established on the Rock which was Peter, to whom he gave the charge of feeding his lambs, feeding his sheep. In a word, it is a love that shows itself in obedience to his will. *If you love me, you will keep my commands.* Let us place ourselves on the

shore of the Lake, in the midst of the group gathered around our Lord, and listen to him as he asks each of us if we love him. Yes, you do? Then share in my mission: *“Feed my sheep!”*

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Second reflection: (John 21: 15-19)

Love for the Person of Jesus Among the many distinctive things about the Christian religion is one that appears in our Lord’s words to Simon Peter in today’s Gospel passage. As far as I am aware, the great founders of the non-Christian religions did not demand of their followers then nor in perpetuity that they, their own persons, be the object of their disciples’ *love*. Their disciples presumably did love them, but those founders did not see that love as essential to their religions. What was essential was the acceptance of their doctrines. Now, of course our Lord requires total acceptance of his doctrine as

the truth that comes from God. But he also requires that his disciples love him personally, and with a total love. His own Person is the object of his teaching, together with all that is connected with his Person. As we read in our passage (John 21:15-19), Our Lord requires of Simon Peter that he love him, indeed more than the other disciples — which implies that he required of the other disciples that they love him too. Through Simon as his chief representative, our Lord asks each of us to love him personally with all our heart.

This all stands to reason, for if we must love God with all our heart and being, and if Jesus is God — as he is — then we will love Jesus with all our mind, heart, soul and being. Let us then resolve to do this daily, and by the grace of God grow in the perfection of this love.



Saturday of the Seventh week in Eastertide

Morning Mass

Entrance Antiphon Acts 1:14 The disciples devoted themselves with one accord to prayer with the women, and Mary the Mother of Jesus, and his brethren, alleluia.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that we, who have celebrated the paschal festivities, may by your gift hold fast to them in the way that we live our lives. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 28:16-20, 30-31; Psalm 11:4, 5, 7;
John 21:20-25

Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, Lord, who is going to betray you?) When Peter saw him, he asked, Lord, what about him? Jesus answered, If I want

him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me. Because of this, the rumour spread among the brothers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true. Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written. (John 21:20-25)

Differences

I remember passing a farming property where there was a herd of horses. Among them was a kangaroo — and wherever the horses went, the kangaroo hopped along with them. Somehow the kangaroo had identified with those horses and was content to live with them, and they with it. The kangaroo was, of course, unaware of its difference in genus from the horses. The idea of species, genus and kind is just that — it is an *idea*, and being an idea it requires the power of an intellect to form an abstraction. Such a power is beyond the animal

and is part of the spiritual endowment of the intellect of man. The point being made here, though, is that the world is one of differences in kind, and man perceives this fact. The universe is made up of an incalculable range of differences — differences among galaxies, differences among planets, differences within the atomic particle, differences among animals, insects, plant life and man. Within the unseen spiritual realm the differences are even more astonishing. St Thomas Aquinas teaches that each angelic being is his own species. That is, there is as much difference between one angel and another as there is between species of birds, for each angel is a distinct species, complete and entire in itself. Of course, we cannot imagine this because we cannot imagine an angel, for the angel has no spatial characteristics. My point here, though, is that God has created a universe, both seen and unseen, that is enriched with incalculable *variety in kind and degree*. It is an unending garden of different flowers, and the differences within humankind, among men and women — all of whom belong to a particular species — is but one

instance of this created variety. We need but think of the individuality of each person's fingerprints to realize this. There is a further point, but obviously profoundly connected with it, and that is that there is a vast variety of *callings* coming from God to man. His *call to me* is different from his call to the next person. Our Lord chose from his many disciples certain ones to be the Twelve — and left the others where they were. Among the Twelve, he chose three to be his companions in a more special sense: Peter, James and John. Paul refers to them as the pillars of the infant Church in Jerusalem.

The first wonderful thing about God's particular call to me is the very fact that he calls *me*. I am what I am because of God's loving choice, and I have my work to do because of God's loving choice. As a result of God's choice, each person has his assigned gift — and that gift may seem an affliction to another. But it is a gift, even if it involves suffering. Who knows what its proper use may lead to in God's plan! God calls me to do his will, with my own path and my own distinctive mission. The grandeur of

my life will depend on my fulfilling that path that has been lovingly chosen for me. I remember watching the report of a dog show. The winning dog was the smallest of all the entries, and it won not because of its commanding the attention of all observers, but because it was *all it should have been within its kind* — more so than were the other dogs within their kind. It had no need to be “jealous,” as it were, of the other larger, more powerful, more impressive dogs. It was all it could and should be. And yet, so very sadly, this point is commonly forgotten among men. Men are prone to be jealous of the next person because of that person’s endowments, his opportunities, his calling. But no. All he need do, is do what God wants of him. The disciples of John the Baptist came to him to tell him that Jesus “*who was with you beyond the Jordan, and to whom you bore witness, he is baptizing, and all are going to him. John answered that ‘a man can receive nothing unless it is given to him from heaven’*“(John 3:26-29). John was content and grateful for his calling, and rejoiced at the prominence of Jesus Christ. By contrast, when Jesus was

handed over to Pilate, he could see that it was because of envy that they had done this. All of this brings us to our Gospel today. It is a lesson with which the Gospel of St John closes. *“Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, Lord, who is going to betray you?) When Peter saw him, he asked, Lord, what about him? Jesus answered, If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me”* (John 21:20-25).

We notice others who seem to have a better path in life than we, better luck, more achievements, greater gifts. Why him, Lord, and not me? Our Lord would say, If I want him to follow that path, to be that kind of person, to have those opportunities, what is that to you? *You must follow me.* That is all we need worry about amid the differences we see among the children of God. Let each of us do our best to discover the will of God as it manifests itself in our Christian calling, in the voice of legitimate authority, in our specific vocation and profession in life, in our

circumstances, in our God-given aspirations and yearnings.
Knowing the will of God, let us then do it.



Pentecost Sunday — Vigil Mass

Entrance Antiphon Rom 5:5; cf. 8:11 The love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Spirit of God dwelling within us, alleluia.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who willed the Paschal Mystery to be encompassed as a sign in fifty days, grant that from out of the scattered nations the confusion of many tongues may be gathered by heavenly grace into one great confession of your name. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Or:

Grant, we pray, almighty God, that the splendour of your glory may shine forth upon us and that, by the bright rays of the Holy Spirit, the light of your light may confirm the hearts of those born again by your grace. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 105;
Romans 8:22-27; John 7:37-39

On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him. By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified. (John 7:37-39)

The Spirit There are various allusions to the Spirit of God in the Old Testament. Most strikingly, the first is right at the beginning of the Bible when God is introduced as the Creator of the heavens and the earth. The “*earth*” was “*void*” and lacked all “*form*” — “*and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters*” (Genesis 1: 2). Then the word of God is uttered. Of course, this is not a formal Trinitarian declaration, but the Christian who has the Key, which is Christ, is able to see

an indirect antecedent notice of the future revelation of the trinity of divine Persons. The *Breath*, the Air, the Life of God was there with God as he was about to utter his creative Word, bringing into being a world of order. The Breath of God was at work in the creation of man too. In the next chapter we read that “*the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being*” (2:7). So the breath of life given to Adam came from God *breathing* into his nostrils. The man inhaled the *Breath* of God and he was given the breath of life. We may interpret this breath of life as referring not only to the gift of natural human life to Adam, but to the gift of the Holy Spirit and his elevating grace. Adam was granted a wonderfully endowed human nature with a splendid integrity and with special gifts of the Spirit. He was created in grace, whereas we are not, because of Adam’s sin. He was granted the breath of life — which is to say, human life and the Holy Spirit. We remember, too, that in his Gospel St John has something to say about the true life of man: the

Word is involved. In the Word *there was life, and that life was the light of men* (1:4). This gift of the breath of life to Adam, which included the Breath of God, made of man a partner of God in constant communion with him. While this was lost to the race by Adam's sin, it did not prevent God from granting the gift of the Holy Spirit to select persons throughout salvation history. In the Book of Nehemiah, Ezra the priest gives us a comprehensive statement on the history of God's chosen people: "*You gave your good Spirit to instruct them, and did not withhold your manna from their mouth...*" (9:20). He came upon the judges — as in Judges 3:10, Judges 6:34 with Gideon, Judges 11:29 with Jephthah, and 15:14 with Samson. He came upon certain kings (1 Samuel 11:6) and the prophets.

Two things we notice: the gift of the Spirit is to a select few who have a mission, and, according to Isaiah 63:10, the people of God "*rebelled and grieved his holy Spirit*". Stephen declared before the Sanhedrin that "*You stiff-necked people, ... you always resist the Holy Spirit. As*

your fathers did, so do you” (Acts 7:51). A great promise was coming: the Breath of God was coming to his people: “Prophecy unto the Wind, prophecy, son of man, and say to the Wind, Thus says the Lord God, Come from the four winds, O Breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live. So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the Breath came unto them, and they lived” (Ezekiel 37: 9-10). The Wind, the Breath that was hovering over the void at the beginning would come again, and the bones would live. The prophet Joel makes a most significant declaration: “It shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even upon the menservants and the maidservants in those days, I will pour out my spirit” (2: 28-29). More light on the matter is given in other prophecies. Isaiah foresees “a shoot from the stump of Jesse”, “a branch shall grow out of his roots. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the

spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord” (Isaiah 11: 1-2). The One who was coming would be filled with the Spirit, and, obviously, he would be the instrument of this pouring out of the Spirit on the people. John the Baptist identified Jesus of Nazareth as the one who would baptize the people with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Jesus Christ declared himself to be the promised Messiah (as in John 4:26), and revealed the Holy Spirit to be a divine Person who would teach Christ’s disciples all things (John 14:26), bearing witness to Jesus (15:26), guiding Christ’s disciples to all truth (16:130, and convicting “*the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment*” (16:8). At the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the Church as a public Reality was born. The Acts of the Apostles narrates his active guidance of the Church, such as when he directed that Barnabas and Saul be set apart for his work (13:2).

But what is especially noteworthy, and what is the great Good News, is the ease with which the Holy Spirit can be received — and this brings us to our Gospel today.

It is by believing in the risen Jesus that we can receive this cherished and all-important Gift. *“If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.’ By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified”* (John 7: 37-39). Of course, it must be genuine belief, and this presumes repentance and the resolve to put the word of Christ into practice. Let us cherish this Gift, and live by his life.



Pentecost Sunday — Mass During the Day

Entrance Antiphon Wisdom 1:7 The Spirit of the Lord has filled the whole world and that which contains all things understands what is said, alleluia.

Or:

Romans 5:5; cf. 8:11 The love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Spirit of God dwelling within us, alleluia.

Collect O God, who by the mystery of today's great feast sanctify your whole Church in every people and nation, pour out, we pray, the gifts of the Holy Spirit across the face of the earth and, with the divine grace that was at work when the Gospel was first proclaimed, fill now once more the hearts of believers. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 2:1-11; Psalm 104:1, 24, 29-31, 34;
1 Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13; John 20:19-23

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, Peace be with you! After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. And with that he breathed on them and said, Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven. (John 20:19-23)

The Spirit of God On Pentecost Sunday we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit to the infant Church, and through the Church to each of the Church's members. When we set St Luke's account of Pentecost in The Acts of the Apostles against the whole sweep of Scripture, it is plain that the event involved an altogether special coming of God the Holy Spirit to his people. God came to Moses in the Burning Bush. God came to his people when he took them through the Red Sea from the pursuing Egyptians. He came to his people on Mount Sinai

and gave them the Covenant. He came to David, when, having been anointed by Samuel, the Spirit of the Lord fell upon him (1 Samuel 16:13). He came to his people when speaking through various of his prophets. Pentecost was a special culmination of these comings of God to his people, in the infant Church gathered in the Upper Room of Jerusalem. Thirty-three years earlier there had been the coming of God to his people when the Word was made flesh, an event momentous though unnoticed except for a few specially chosen, such as the shepherds and the Magi. Now at Pentecost there was this further divine coming, not of God the Son, but of the third divine Person, God the Holy Spirit. Just as the prophets had foretold the coming of the Messiah, so the Messiah promised the coming of the Holy Spirit — a promise prefigured in various of the prophecies, such as Joel 3:1. At the Last Supper, Christ called him the Advocate — the other Defender — the Spirit of truth. *“When the Advocate comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who issues from the Father, he will be my witness”* (John 15:26). Our

Lord had taught them about himself, about the Father, and about the saving plan of God. But they needed life and light and power from God if the word of Christ was to be grasped and to have its effect in them. “I still have many things to say to you but they would be too much for you now. But when the Spirit of truth comes, he will lead you to the complete truth, since he will not be speaking as from himself but will say only what he has learnt, since all he tells you will be taken from what is mine” (John 16:12 15).

So important was this coming of the Holy Spirit, that our Lord told his disciples that unless he returned to the Father, the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, would not come to them. He was saying in effect that it was critically important that the Spirit of truth come, or else, despite all he had done and suffered, little would be achieved. If there was to be any life in what he had planted in his disciples and in the foundation of the Kingdom he had laid, the Holy Spirit must come and act. What came to the Church with the coming of the Holy Spirit was life! At Pentecost, the Church was born to a new life. It saw the light of day and

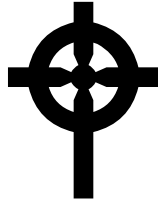
began to grow in strength. With this life came light. The light of God, involving conviction and understanding, filled the hearts of the Apostles and the Church's members, and they immediately began to do what Christ had said to Pilate was his mission: to *bear witness to the truth*, the truth being the truth of Christ. The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost shows to every generation that the Spirit of God, who is the Lord and giver of life, brings life and light to the Church and the Church's members. At the beginning of his Gospel (1:4-5), John says that in the Word was life, and the life was the light of men. That life which was the light of men, found in the Word made flesh, was the work of the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. Jesus came to give him to us. Long before, the prophet Ezekiel (ch.37) saw a vision of a valley full of bones, a vision of death. Then, suddenly, breath entered the bones and they began to be covered with skin and flesh and sinews, and they stood up, an immense army. They had come to life through the power of God's Spirit. It is sin that brings death, and the taking away of sin means life. The most immediate and

life-giving effect of the coming of the Holy Spirit is the forgiveness of sin. At our Lord's meeting with his disciples on the day of his Resurrection, he breathed on them and gave them a share in his Holy Spirit — and with that he endowed them with power to forgive sin. *“As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. And with that he breathed on them and said, Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven”* (John 20:19-23).

Let us learn to recognise the action of the Spirit of God in our life so as to be able to cooperate with him. Too often we scarcely advert to his presence within us. He is a neglected Guest. Let us ever remember that he abides with us. He is there as our friend, teacher, counsellor, guide, defender, and above all our sanctifier. Remembering him, let us cultivate a love for him, for he is our God. Let us be alert to his promptings. He will enlighten us about Jesus, inspire us to follow him generously, and give us the strength to do so more and more heroically. Let us not

make him sad by deliberate sin, and let us pray to him
daily, Come! Come, O Holy Spirit!





The Season of Ordinary Time



Trinity Sunday

Entrance Antiphon Blest be God the Father, and the Only Begotten Son of God, and also the Holy Spirit, for he has shown us his merciful love.

Collect God our Father, who by sending into the world the Word of truth and the Spirit of sanctification made known to the human race your wondrous mystery, grant us, we pray, that in professing the true faith, we may acknowledge the Trinity of eternal glory and adore your Unity, powerful in majesty. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Exodus 34:4b-6, 8-9; Daniel 3:52-56;
2 Corinthians 13:11-13; John 3:16-18

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through

him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. (John 3:16-18)

The indwelling of the Holy Trinity If we had to identify something about which there has been the widest and most profound disagreement among human beings, a most likely candidate would be what we might call the Ultimate Reality. By “the Ultimate Reality” I mean God, as he is variously imagined and conceived. Today the whole Church celebrates the revelation that God, the Ultimate Reality, has made of himself. He is one in being, and yet three distinct, divine Persons. Each of these Persons is the one and only divine Being. This stupendous truth is not the result of a human quest. There have been numerous religions with their accounts of the Ultimate Reality, arising from the quest of great religious souls — Zoroaster, Buddha, Confucius, Mahomet and many others. The Judeo-Christian religion is not the result of man's quest for God, though it presumes and answers it. Rather,

it is the result of God's quest for man. What is this "quest" of man, or alternatively this "quest" of God for us, about? One way to understand and compare the religions of the world is to consider how, in those religions, man seeks salvation from evil and suffering. The notions of what is man's greatest evil and the cause of his sufferings, the notions of salvation from it, and the ways man attains that salvation, vary profoundly among the religions. But the Judeo-Christian religion is not a pre-eminent way forged by man seeking salvation. It is the revealed way whereby *God* has attained the salvation of man. God revealed himself to Abraham, Moses, and the prophets as the one and only God on whom all depends. He revealed himself as having a plan that far surpasses all that man could hope for in his self-inflicted, broken and sinful plight. God's will is man's sanctification, and his plan is to achieve this by drawing man into his friendship. God is the Holy One, and he means to make man holy. He established his covenant with the people he chose to be his own, and formed this people for the Salvation to come. The Father

then sent his only-begotten Son, the second divine Person of the most holy Trinity, to establish by his Death and Resurrection the definitive covenant which was intended, through the ministry of the Church, to embrace all mankind. All the nations were intended to become Christ's disciples — which is to say his friends. It would be a friendship that would save and sanctify — if only it were accepted. It involves being drawn into the personal life of the three divine Persons of the one and only godhead — Father, Son and Spirit.

So the one, single divine Being, the single Ultimate Reality, is three divine Persons, and each of these Persons is that one divine Being. The Father is God and is the ultimate origin of all. The Son is his only-Begotten, and is himself God just as the Father is God. He is equal to the Father in every way, except that he is not the Father and ultimate origin. But he is the Being that the Father is. The Son became man and is our Redeemer and our Lord — the Father did not become man, nor did the Holy Spirit. The life of love between the Father and the Son is the third

divine Person. He is the Holy Spirit, the same one and only God, as is the Father and as is the Son. The Holy Spirit is the gift of the Father and the Son to the Church, and through the Church to the Church's members. As God's gift, the Holy Spirit is the Church's life, just as he is the life of the Father and of the Son — with this enormous difference that we still struggle with sin while God is the Holy One. We adore the one and only God who is three divine Persons, each of whom is the one and only God. Think of the inner life of God, the limitless love between the three divine Persons both now and from all eternity. Imagine sharing in that life! Imagine its happiness in heaven! Well, we are each of us called thus to share in it, both now, and then fully and definitively in heaven. We share in it by the gift of the Holy Spirit. We share in it as long as we are in the state of grace. What does this mean? This share in the life of God means that God the Holy Trinity is present to us in our very souls. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit dwell within us if we are in the state of grace, just as they, the three Persons in one God, dwell in

heaven with the angels and saints. This is the most wondrous significance for us of the mystery of the most Holy Trinity. God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit who dwell in the highest heaven before all the angels and saints as the Object of their love and adoration, dwell also within the soul of each one of us who are in the state of grace. This is an astounding privilege, and it should be a tremendous incentive to remain in the friendship of God. This we do by always striving to fulfil his will, and repenting of any failure of obedience to him. We ought live day by day in the thought of the indwelling in our souls of God the holy Trinity. It is the gift of God par excellence, and it is attained by membership in Christ's true Church, and by partaking of its spiritual treasures. The blessing of the divine indwelling ought be a stimulus to constant prayer. God abides within us, loving us and imparting to us his grace to enable us to grow in his friendship.

The problem is that we do not think of the fact of the indwelling within us of the Blessed Trinity. We do not

take advantage of it. The three divine Persons are neglected Guests in our souls. They are neglected, ignored, forgotten. We ought live daily in their presence, frequently communing with them, living consciously and subconsciously in their presence and their company. We ought pray to God asking that he make of our souls a fit abode for the three divine Persons. The Holy Trinity comes to us to abide in our souls through faith, prayer and the Sacraments, and especially through the Eucharist. Let us then resolve today to turn our minds to this wonderful mystery, the mystery of God the Holy Trinity, and his divine indwelling.



The Body and Blood of Christ

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 81 (80):17 He fed them with the finest wheat and satisfied them with honey from the rock.

Collect O God, who in this wonderful Sacrament have left us a memorial of your Passion, grant us, we pray, so to revere the sacred mysteries of your Body and Blood that we may always experience in ourselves the fruits of your redemption. Who live and reign with God the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Deuteronomy 8:2-3.14-16; Psalm 147;
1 Corinthians 10:16-17; John 6:51-58

Jesus said to the Jewish crowds: I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, How can this man give us his flesh to eat? Jesus said to them, I tell you the truth, unless

you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live for ever. (John 6:51-58)

The Eucharist There is a singular danger that in practical terms we will fail to give to the Holy Eucharist the supreme importance it has in our lives and in the life of the Church. The Eucharist is none other than Jesus himself, the living Jesus in his entirety. We hear this doctrine declared time and again, and if the instructed and believing Catholic were ever to be asked, he would state that the Eucharist is simply the Lord Jesus. But it requires of him repeated acts of faith in Christ's word. The ever-present danger is that he will slide into thinking of the

Eucharist, not for what it *is* by the power of God, namely the person of Christ, but for what it *looks* like, a wafer of bread — with the added thought that it is a wafer in which our Lord is present in some way. Now, our belief is *shown* not only by what we take to be our thoughts, but by our *action* — which is to say, by what we actually *do* in the presence of the Holy Eucharist. In view of this, let us ever remember what the Church formally teaches as having been revealed. At Mass the bread and wine cease to be bread and wine when the ordained priest pronounces the words of Christ, “*This is my body,*” and “*This is my Blood.*” At that, there is no longer bread there, but only the risen Jesus, body, blood, soul and divinity. The appearances and qualities of bread and wine remain, but not the reality or substance of bread and wine. The only objective reality before us is the person of the risen Jesus. Moreover, our Lord, in making himself present at Mass under the appearances of bread and wine, does so precisely as offering himself on our behalf at Calvary. It is not a new offering of himself, but the same sacrifice of himself to the

Father that was made on Calvary. It is that same one Sacrifice that becomes present now, not of course in the circumstances of Calvary, but sacramentally, which is to say in the words and actions and the bread and wine that signify what is made present. In those sacred words and actions uttered by the ordained priest at Mass, and under the appearances of bread and wine, the risen Jesus, given to the Father at Calvary for us, is made present. There follows the wonderful opportunity in Holy Communion of uniting ourselves with Jesus in that one self-offering of himself at Calvary. Then outside of Mass the Blessed Sacrament is reserved in our Tabernacles so as to enable us to maintain this union with our Lord.

The problem is that we tend to ignore and neglect all this. This is due to the fact that we depend so much on visual appearances. We are not just spirit, but spirit or soul informing body. We are each of us an embodied spiritual Self, and therefore in knowing reality, in the first instance our spiritual Self grasps what it sees, hears, touches. Indeed, we tend to rest in what we know by our senses,

rather than passing then to what is beyond them. This we can do by faith or reason, or by a combination of both. If someone is dressed in high class clothes, or drives a magnificent car, or lives in a grand house, or does things that appear to be special and important, we tend to give to that person more importance and respect. We tend to judge the reality of things simply by their appearances. This is because in exercising our powers of knowing reality we tend to rest in what our senses perceive. People did the same with our Lord himself when he walked the earth. He was a man, and obviously so. So many did not rise above those appearances. So many failed, or refused, to recognise and accept that he was the Messiah, and far more — God, the Son of God made man — despite all the indications of this that he gave. We may presume that often it was without malice, but was, rather, a sign of weakness — moral weakness nevertheless. This can be very much the case with the way we treat the Holy Eucharist. Because all we see is the appearance of a wafer of bread, we can unconsciously act just on the appearance,

even though we may not explicitly assert that it is just a wafer. Our *actions* manifest our *practical* belief, and belie our words or profession, and even what we might think to be our conscious thoughts. What we see in the church is the small Tabernacle. So, being creatures of sense and uninclined towards the effort that faith requires, we tend to act as if *all* that there is before us is a mere Tabernacle. Being human, we tend to depend on appearances. What we must do is take active steps to nourish our faith in what the Eucharist really is, despite the appearances. We must actively focus our minds on the Reality being made present during Mass, and the Reality before us within the Tabernacle outside of Mass. This requires concentration, a focus of the mind on the content of the Faith, and on the reason for its acceptance — namely the word of Christ as proclaimed and explained by the Church.

As we come to Mass, let us be recollected, thinking of what will really be happening at Mass. Let us always arrive a little early, and never late. Let us enter silently, reverently and prayerfully, avoiding distracting

conversation. Let us begin with personal prayer as we await the beginning of Mass. Let us enter into the penitential rite. Jesus will be speaking to us in the readings and in the homily. The risen Jesus will make himself and his sacrifice of Calvary present in the Eucharistic Prayer. Jesus will come to us in Holy Communion. Outside Mass, Jesus is present in the Tabernacle. So let us actively adopt practices of reverence and prayer that will protect and nourish our faith in this most central and holy of the mysteries of our Catholic Faith. The Eucharist is the summit and source of all.



Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus

Entrance Antiphon Ps 33 (32):11, 19 The designs of his Heart are from age to age, to rescue their souls from death, and to keep them alive in famine.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that we, who glory in the Heart of your beloved Son and recall the wonders of his love for us, may be made worthy to receive an overflowing measure of grace from that fount of heavenly gifts. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Or:

O God, who in the Heart of your Son, wounded by our sins, bestow on us in mercy the boundless treasures of your love, grant, we pray, that, in paying him the homage of our devotion, we may also offer worthy reparation. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with

you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Deuteronomy 7:6-11; Ps. 103:1-4, 6 8, 10;
John 4:7-16; Matthew 11:25-30

At that time Jesus said, I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:25-30)

Icons Perhaps the most common topic of discussion among anthropologists, archaeologists and historians of culture are religious artefacts. There are

countless objects that have a religious meaning, and among them are depictions of the deities. In fact, it is scarcely possible to imagine Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Mesopotamian and other classical civilizations without their portrayals of the deities. Setting aside the obvious question, which occurred to the educated of classical times, of the very reality of many such “deities,” the further problem was that the objects depicting them were so easily regarded as the deities themselves. So it is that the revealed religion of Israel prohibited the portrayal of any so-called “gods,” most especially the one and only God, the God of Israel, Yahweh. A portrayal of *Yahweh* would be the portrayal of the one true God and not just the portrayal of a projection of the religious imagination. Still, the danger remained that the portrayal itself could come to be worshipped, as if it were Yahweh. We read in the book of Exodus that “*when the Lord had finished speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the commandments, the stone tablets inscribed by God’s own finger*” (31:18). But with Moses still up on the Mountain,

the people gathered around Aaron and asked that he “*make us a god who will become our leader*” (32:1). The god they intended was their creation — after the manner of the gods of Egypt. Accordingly, they made “*a molten calf*” with the jewellery of their wives, sons and daughters. Then they cried out “*This is your God, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt*” (32:4). They proceeded, with Aaron’s connivance, to offer holocausts and peace offerings to the molten calf (32:6). It was a major apostasy, and led to radical action by Moses when he returned. The point is that the banning of graven images was an abiding feature of the religion of Israel, while at the same time the use of images constituted a constant temptation. The grand Temple of Jerusalem, which in the time of our Lord was a wonder of the world, contained no image of the God of Israel. This fact must have been a major perplexity to the Gentile peoples.

There were many features of the spiritual revolution which the leaders of the Jews came to see in Jesus Christ. The most serious was his plain assumption of equality with

Yahweh God. There had never been anything like this, nothing remotely like it, in the history of the chosen people. “*Are you claiming to be greater than our father Abraham, who died, or the prophets, who died?*” was the obvious question. “*Before Abraham came to be, I AM,*” Christ claimed in the presence of the leaders — at which they took up stones with which to stone him (John 8:52-59). A feature of this religious revolution was that the one God was now visible. In Jesus of Nazareth himself, there was an image of the God of Israel. St Paul writes that Jesus Christ is *the image* of the unseen God (Colossians 1: 15). While all images of the God of Israel had been long and persistently banned so as to protect the faith of the chosen people, here now before them all was One who claimed to be the authentic Image of God. Indeed, he was God himself depicted before them. God willed to present himself visibly, in his own unique “Image” that was Jesus his Son. What this meant, of course, was that the “Image” of God which Jesus himself was, could be depicted in other images which portray Him. The one true God could now

be shown in images because he himself had given to mankind his own Image, which was his only-begotten Son made man. The Word made flesh was the divinely-authenticated Image of God given to mankind, the Image of God which could and should be worshipped by man. Jesus Christ, the Image of the unseen God, is the Object of the Christian religion. This was one of the revolutions of Christ's new and definitive revelation, built on and fulfilling the revelation granted to the patriarchs and prophets of the Old. God was now visible. God had shown his Face, which could be seen and depicted. That Face was Jesus Christ, and soon it was depicted for we begin to see images of the Good Shepherd in early Christian art. Despite the rage of iconoclasm, in the seventh Ecumenical Council at Nicaea (787) the Church formally sanctioned the use of religious images, as "*open books to remind us of God*" who became visible as man.

All of this brings us to the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In this fully sanctioned devotion and liturgical celebration, the person of Jesus Christ is loved and adored

under the aspect of his fully human and divine love for us. In Jesus Christ, God is revealed as having a heart of love. He is not distant, unconcerned, absent, silent. He is full of overflowing and very human love. To an overflowing and superabundant degree, God is, we might say, humane. His very love is depicted in the common image of human love, the human heart. The Sacred Heart of Jesus Christ is the human heart of God incarnate. We venerate this image as depicting Jesus Christ, the living Object of our religion, with his foremost feature highlighted: his divine and human love. Let us love him, then!



Second reflection: (Matthew 11:25-30)

The heart of God It has been observed that devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus is at the centre of the Christian religion. Because of the Incarnation, the utterly transcendent God has a heart of flesh, as revealed in the

person of his Son. In our Gospel passage today, our Lord tells us that a true knowledge of both the Father and the Son has to be *revealed* to us, if it is to be known. It is revealed to the one who humbly draws near to Christ and learns from him. Our life's work is to come to know Jesus intimately, and knowing him intimately to make him our model. As our Lord says in today's Gospel passage, *Come to me and learn of me for I am meek and humble of heart.* We should strive to learn of this. Making his sentiments our own will bring peace to our souls.

Let us resolve to be devoted to the Heart of Jesus Christ, which is to say, his love. As St Paul puts it, *let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.* Let us make this the object of our constant prayer.



The Immaculate Heart of Mary

Entrance Antiphon Ps 13 (12):6 My heart will rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, who has been bountiful with me.

Collect O God, who prepared a fit dwelling place for the Holy Spirit in the Heart of the Blessed Virgin Mary, graciously grant that through her intercession we may be a worthy temple of your glory. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

The Immaculate Heart of Mary In 1942, Pope Pius XII consecrated the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. However, this is not a new devotion. In the seventeenth century, St John Eudes preached it, together with that of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The Church instituted this feast to encourage us to trust always in the intercession of our Blessed Mother as a source of grace and mercy. The all pure heart of Mary beckons us to be pure of heart, keeping

it free from attachments so that it may respond easily to do God's will. She teaches us to love all in the Heart of Jesus.

Scripture today: Isaiah 61:9-11; Responsorial Psalm: 1
Samuel 2; Luke 2: 41-51

The parents of Jesus went every year to Jerusalem, at the solemn day of the Pasch. And when he was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem, according to the custom of the feast. As they were returning at the end of the feast, the child Jesus remained behind in Jerusalem unknown to his parents. Thinking that he was in the company, they travelled a day's journey, and then sought him among their kinsfolk and acquaintances. Not finding him, they returned to Jerusalem, seeking him. And it came to pass that after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were astonished at his wisdom and his answers. And seeing him, they marvelled. His mother said to him: Son, why have you done this to us? behold, your father and I have sought you,

sorrowing. And he said to them: How is it that you sought me? did you not know that I must be about the things that are my Father's? And they did not understand what he said to them. And he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them. And his mother kept all these words in her heart. (Luke 2:41-51)

Mary The striking feature about the inner life of Jesus of Nazareth as it became manifest to his disciples was his unique relationship with his heavenly Father. By the power of the Holy Spirit his whole Self was utterly united to his heavenly Father. We read in the Gospels of his spending the whole night in prayer to God. After seeing him in prayer on one occasion, his disciples asked him to teach them to pray. He gave them what we call the Lord's Prayer. It is our prayer to the Father of Jesus Christ, whom he, Christ, teaches us to regard as our heavenly Father. In the Lord's Prayer we pray with our divine Lord, and under his instruction, to God who is his Father and our Father. On rising from the dead Jesus told Mary Magdalene to go to the brothers and to tell them that he

was ascending to “*my Father and your Father, to my God and your God*” (John 20:17). But while Christ, the Son of God, instructs us to pray to his Father as “*our Father*,” nevertheless God is the Father of Jesus Christ in a unique sense. The God who is revealed by Jesus is his own Father by very nature. Jesus is God the Father’s divine Son by nature. So exalted was the claimed relationship between Jesus and God his Father that the Jewish authorities picked up stones with which to stone him because, not content with breaking the Sabbath, he spoke of God as his own Father, making himself equal to God. Christ’s enemies knew what he was claiming to be by the very way he spoke and the terms he used, and they were determined on his death as a result. Christ gave his life for the salvation of the world bearing witness to the truth of his divine sonship. The point I am making is that the most significant thing in the life of Jesus of Nazareth was his unparalleled and unique relationship with God his Father. Now, St Luke in his Gospel shows that Christ made this manifest not only in his public ministry and Passion, Death and Resurrection,

but in his childhood too. From his boyhood this was the keynote of his inner life. His own parents not only knew it from the words of the Angel, but knew it from the Boy's own words. St Luke gives us in our Gospel event today one notable instance — the occasion when the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. “*Did you not know that I must be about my Father's affairs?*” he asked. St Luke does not say, incidentally, that this was the first time the boy Jesus mentioned his heavenly “*Father*” to his parents, nor the first time that he said he was doing the will of his “*Father*.” Indeed, it seems to me that the scene suggests that it was not the first time at all — perhaps it was a keynote scene.

On this particular day, our gaze is directed to the mother of Jesus Christ, and what was going on in her most holy heart. The point that stands out in our Gospel text is her all-consuming love for her divine Son. Son of God and Son of Mary, he was the Object of her life in a way that surpassed all other disciples. Her heart was filled with the thought of him, and for this reason her anguish was so great when her Son went missing. Her husband, Joseph,

foster-father of Jesus Christ, was also filled with love for Jesus and likewise gripped with anguish at the absence of his charge. Mary loved Jesus, of course, with all her heart and soul. There was nothing in her life nor in her soul that was unworthy or inconsistent with this most pure love for him. There was no-one on this earth with whom Christ had a greater intimacy than Mary his mother, the next being Joseph, his foster-father. That is to say, when we think of the human heart of Jesus Christ, we ought think of Mary his mother for she had the foremost place in his sacred heart. When we think of Mary, this great figure of the Scriptures, we ought think also of Jesus Christ, for he filled her mind and heart. The two were inseparable at the level of the heart. The sacred heart of Jesus was inseparable from the sinless heart of Mary his mother. The demons called Christ the Holy One of God. Mary is, because she was filled with grace, the immaculate one. Nothing but love for God filled her life, and this love is what was manifested in our Gospel scene today (Luke 2: 41-51), with Mary searching in utter anxiety for three days before

finding her Son in the Temple. We can imagine the overwhelming relief at finding him, and the puzzlement of love in wondering why he had acted thus. He gave her a reminder: the will of my Father is the key to understanding all that I do. Even if his holy mother could not at times understand the plan of God, this was an early reminder to her that in respect to him, all was done in accord with God's will. Her Son belonged to the Father, and the Father would take him where he intended — by the power of the divine Spirit. This was a further step in her path of being, as she had said to the Angel, *“the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done to me according to your word.”*

Mary the mother of Jesus is the constant model of the Church and of every member of the Church in what it is to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. She is also our mother, by Christ's gift of her to the beloved disciple when he was dying on the Cross. The Church has always seen in that donation a donation involving each of us. Mary is the perfect woman in history, the one given entirely to God. Her human heart was in every respect unsullied by any

kind of sin, original, personal, venial or mortal. No sin every touched her from the first instant of her conception. This was the fruit of grace, the gift of God, with which she fully and faithfully co-operated during her life. *Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us now and at the hour of our death!*



The Baptism of the Lord (First Sunday in Ordinary Time)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Mt 3:16-17 After the Lord was baptized, the heavens were opened, and the Spirit descended upon him like a dove, and the voice of the Father thundered: This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who, when Christ had been baptized in the River Jordan and as the Holy Spirit descended upon him, solemnly declared him your beloved Son, grant that your children by adoption, reborn of water and the Holy Spirit, may always be well pleasing to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Or:

O God, whose Only Begotten Son has appeared in our very flesh, grant, we pray, that we may be inwardly transformed

through him whom we recognize as outwardly like ourselves. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 42:1-4.6-7; Psalm 29;
Acts 10:34-38; Matthew 3:13-17

Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John resisted him, saying "I ought to be baptized by you, and you come to me?" Jesus answered him, "Allow it to be so for now. For it is fitting that we fulfil all that is right." Then he consented. Jesus, being baptized, immediately came out of the water, and lo, the heavens were opened to him. He saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and coming upon him. And a voice from heaven, saying "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:13-17)

Our Father Today we think of our Lord's baptism in the Jordan, and the revelation of the Blessed Trinity which it involved. God the Son is baptised by John, and in this public fashion declares himself to be in

solidarity with sinful humanity. The Holy Spirit descends upon him to empower his humanity for his mission to redeem sinful mankind. The Father pronounces from heaven that Jesus is his beloved Son in whom he is well pleased. Many things can be contemplated in this event, but let us especially consider the words uttered by the Father, and what they reveal of him, the Father. “*This is my beloved Son,*” he said. The Father’s words not only reveal who Jesus is. They also reveal who he, the Father, is — he is precisely the “*Father.*” At our own baptism, we are initiated into the triune life of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Our Lord’s baptism was a forerunner of our own baptism when the Holy Spirit comes upon us and we are granted a share in our Lord’s sonship. We become adopted sons of God, and at the moment of our baptism the Father says of each of us, *This is my adopted son in whom I am well pleased.* We each become a new creation, and are made adopted children of the Father. All our sins, original and personal, are taken away and we are filled with the holiness given to us by the Holy Spirit. We are, though,

left with a propensity to sin. Sadly, subsequent to our baptism, we deliberately accede to this propensity and fall into sin. But we have the Sacrament of Penance to enable us to regain the state of grace, and to grow in the holiness given to us at our baptism. Our vocation from the moment of our baptism is *to seek personal holiness*. If we fail to take up that call, our life, so full of promise at our baptism, will be a failure and a tragedy. Holiness consists in living consistently and with generosity that supernatural life which began in us at our baptism. Because of our baptism we are called to live for God as his children, children of God who is our Father. On the basis of our being created, and then re-created in Jesus Christ, let us be filled with the conviction that God is our Father, a Father who loves us more than we can possibly imagine. Our calling is to love and trust him.

All through life we must adhere to what God has revealed, in good times and bad, in times of blessing and in times of tragedy. It is one thing to hold to this belief when all is going well. A special challenge arises when things

seem to be going very badly. At the end of 2004, a tremendous earthquake under the Indian Ocean convulsed the land masses of that part of the Asian world. It may have faded from the memory of very many, but at the time the news of the world was full of the effects of that earthquake under the sea. There were hundreds of thousands of deaths across several countries. In the newspapers there appeared articles wondering about the very existence of God — how could God have permitted this evil to happen? We do not know why he permits such things to happen, but St Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans that through one man sin entered the world and with sin came death, and death has spread through the whole human race. So death comes ultimately from the sin of man, man's original sin compounded by an unimaginable number of personal sins. Ultimately, evil comes from sin. Now, while God respects the freedom he gave to man and the consequences of its use, he is still our Father, and is constantly working to draw tremendous good out of evil. Good was drawn forth from the evil of that

earthquake. There was a vast outpouring of funds and charity to help the peoples of Asia, and the world came together in a way not often seen. Australia gave one billion dollars to Indonesia, and was poised for a new stage of collaboration with that country, which was the country hardest hit. We could surely see in this aftermath of aid, at least something of the good that God was drawing out of the evil that so suddenly descended. It was an evil that God did not want, but which he allowed, for man freely chose by his original sin to disobey God and this disobedience dislocated not just man but the very world profoundly. We can be sure that God on that tragic occasion would not have left so many people completely at the mercy of the elements. Perhaps before those terrible tidal waves came, God was tending with his special grace those soon to lose their lives. Perhaps their lost lives, preceding a great good that God would draw from the tragedy, derived great value in God's sight from that future good which their deaths occasioned. Much of the human family came together. God may have mercifully rewarded

very many of them accordingly. While that is pure speculation, the point here is that God draws good out of the evil which in his wisdom he permits.

God is the Father of all mankind. In a special way he is Father to all those who are in Christ by baptism. Today in celebrating the Baptism of Christ, we celebrate our own baptism. By it we became children of God. All our lives let us regard God, the Lord of heaven and of earth, as our *Father* who looks with love on us his little ones no matter what may happen to us. Let us trust him, endeavouring to serve him humbly and obediently as his children, seeking true holiness.



Monday of the first week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Upon a lofty throne, I saw a man seated, whom a host of angels adore, singing in unison: Behold him, the name of whose empire is eternal.

Collect Attend to the pleas of your people with heavenly care, O Lord, we pray, that they may see what must be done and gain strength to do what they have seen. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Samuel 1:1-8; Psalm 115; Mark 1:14-20

When John was imprisoned, Jesus went into Galilee preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, saying: “The time is accomplished, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News.” Passing by the sea of Galilee he saw Simon and Andrew his brother, casting nets into the sea (for they were fishermen). Jesus said to them: “Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.”

Immediately leaving their nets they followed him. Going on from there a little, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother who also were mending their nets in the boat. Immediately he called them, and leaving their father Zebedee in the boat with his hired men, they followed him.
(Mark 1:14-20)

Discipleship Before considering our Gospel scene today, let us make a passing observation on a feature of the course of events mentioned in our Gospel passage which are a little obscure. It concerns the different perspectives of the different Gospels. In our passage today, Mark tells us that it was when John was imprisoned that Jesus went into Galilee preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. St Matthew writes that after Christ's encounter with Satan in the wilderness, he heard of John's imprisonment. At this, he withdrew to Galilee and began his public ministry, based in Capernaum (5: 12-13). St Luke, having made a passing reference to John's arrest (3: 19-20), writes that after his temptations in the wilderness Christ came back to Galilee with the power of the Spirit. On this, Luke does

not give us an ordered sequence of events. John has Jesus returning to Galilee soon after his baptism by John and having already gained his first disciples. He attends the wedding feast of Cana with some disciples in his company. In John's order of things, our Lord returns to Jerusalem for the paschal feast and cleanses the Temple. While in Jerusalem, Nicodemus comes to see him. Then he and his disciples go into the land of Judea, and there "*he remained with them, baptizing. John was still baptizing, too, in Aenon, near Salim*" (3: 22). Then Jesus once more withdrew to Galilee. That is to say, while Matthew and Mark give the impression that our Lord launched his public ministry in earnest in Galilee when John had been arrested, and while Luke seems vague on the point, John suggests that John's prophetic ministry was continuing in Judea while our Lord's was beginning in earnest in Galilee, and indeed was starting to eclipse that of John. Then John was taken from the scene by Herod. If we take into account the different purposes of the various Gospels, including the symbolism of John, I think it can all be harmonized. But

let us leave that to the best scholars, and concentrate on our scene today. Our Lord has returned from Judea, has begun his public ministry, and is by the Sea of Galilee. Perhaps it is early morning, for crowds are not mentioned. There he calls his first disciples to both himself, and to a share in his mission.

John the Baptist also had disciples. Several prophets before him must have had theirs — and Isaiah refers to his own disciples. I suspect that the prophets simply attracted disciples, rather than actively gathering them in numbers. We are not actually told of John calling people to be his disciples. I myself doubt that he did this — rather, he accepted them when they came. I suspect that his humility was so great that he did not presume to begin a school — even though he did indeed, by the force and quality of his instruction to the disciples who came, begin a school that long outlived him. We read of John's disciples in the Acts of the Apostles being met by Christ's missionaries. Apollos had been one such. But as I say, I suspect that John's disciples just gathered around him. He then

schooled them in a more profound religious life, based on the Revelation given to God's chosen people and on his own prophetic teaching. Now, Christ did not simply admit disciples to his company, and instruct them as they happened to come. He also actively sought them. Most interestingly, he framed his and their very mission in terms of *gaining disciples*. When he rose from the dead and instructed his disciples to go to the whole world, their mission was to *make disciples of all the nations*. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ was the end game, as we might say — it was the term of all things, the very purpose of life. Once a person has become a true disciple of Jesus Christ, that person has attained his end in life. Nothing more is required of him than that he be the truest and best disciple he can be. This means following in the Master's footsteps and carrying his cross after him. Not so, is the case of other disciples and masters. This point is encapsulated in that beautiful scene in the Gospel of St John in which John the Baptist, in the company of two of his disciples, sees Jesus walking by. *There is the Lamb of God*, he says to

them. At that, they leave him for Jesus. Being a disciple of John has as its term being a disciple of Jesus Christ. All men are called to be disciples of Christ. But there is this also, that being Christ's disciple involves being given a share in Christ's own mission.

So it is that our Lord, walking by the Sea of Galilee, calls Simon and Andrew, and then James and John, not only to be his disciples, but to share in his mission of calling other disciples. That is the mission granted them. It is to call all men to be disciples of Jesus Christ. This will involve not merely listening to the teaching of a Master, and trying to put it into practice. It will also mean receiving a share in his spirit, the Holy Spirit. The spirit of Elijah was passed on to Elisha, who received a double portion. In our case, we receive the Spirit of Jesus, but of course Jesus is the very Source. So let us think of the mission. We are called to be fishers of men, bringing them to Jesus.

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Second reflection: (Mark 1:14-20)

The spirit of repentance Our Lord began his public ministry by calling on all his hearers to repent, for the Kingdom of God was near at hand. How important these words are, not only in order to receive Christ for the first time — for the Kingdom of God is present in Christ — but also in order to grow in his life. As St Josemaria Escriva once said, it is not hard to begin — that is easy. The important thing is to continue with *consistency*. St John Henry Newman stressed *consistency* as the hallmark of a true Christian life. Now, to grow in the life of Christ we must grow in the spirit of repentance. This means learning to repent *every day*, recognizing the sins of each day and of the past, and truly repenting of them. It means growing in the capacity to repent very sincerely every time we approach the Sacrament of Penance. Every sacramental Confession ought involve a conversion, and this should be frequent and regular. In particular it means recognizing the deliberate venial sins of our daily life, and genuinely repenting of them. We ought confess them to God with the

awareness that, being deliberate, they offend God. If we are to grow in holiness, we must firmly resolve to avoid deliberate venial sin. For this kind of spirit of repentance, we need the grace of God.

Let us pray to the Holy Spirit for the grace to attain a sensitive conscience, for the grace to make a careful and heartfelt examination of conscience repeatedly and regularly, and then for the grace to turn away from deliberate venial sin. Repentance must be a lifelong feature of the ordinary life.



Tuesday of the first week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Upon a lofty throne, I saw a man seated, whom a host of angels adore, singing in unison: Behold him, the name of whose empire is eternal.

Collect Attend to the pleas of your people with heavenly care, O Lord, we pray, that they may see what must be done and gain strength to do what they have seen. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Samuel 1:9-20; Psalm 1 Samuel 2;
Mark 1:21-28

They entered Capharnaum and immediately going into the synagogue on the Sabbath day Jesus began to teach. They were astonished at his doctrine, for he taught them as one having authority and not like the scribes. Now there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit and he cried out, "What have we to do with you, Jesus of

Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” Jesus threatened him, saying: “Speak no more, and go out of the man.” The unclean spirit convulsed him, and crying out with a loud voice went out of him. They were all amazed and they questioned among themselves, saying: “What is this? What is this new doctrine? With authority he commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him.” And his fame spread immediately throughout all of Galilee. (Mark 1: 21-28)

Christ’s authority Most people will have noticed that there seem to be two components in good marketing of a product. There is, firstly, a rational case presented by the producers or the marketers for the worth of the product. If an insurance policy is being advertised, the reasons are given for its being considered a very good policy, and even the best. If no reasons are given, it can scarcely be taken seriously. But usually there is a second element to the advertising exercise. Other authorities are brought in to support what has been said for the product. Perhaps a famous sportsman has his say on the product, or a singer,

or even some ordinary person with whom the audience can easily identify. Often this person will simply state his preference for the product, without presenting much of a rational case. The value of his testimony lies in its coming from someone who is admired. That is to say, it is deemed to be good *because he or she says so*. Now, there is a further aspect to this, and it is that there is a special weight accorded to the judgment of a person of high *moral probity*. Yes, it is persuasive among many viewers when a sportsman appears on television for some product being advertised. But if the sportsman is revealed to be morally deficient, then his credibility is at an end when it comes to any advertising. He will not be used by a producer. Provided all other things are equal, what will count greatly in terms of a worthwhile judgment, a judgment that can be taken as reliable, is if the person is known to be of real virtue. If you have two friends or relatives, both of equal intelligence and experience, both possessed of equal interest in your welfare, but one of them clearly more virtuous than the other and of a higher moral character,

whose advice will you more readily seek? You will seek the advice of the one of higher virtue. It seems to suggest that the intellect is aided by virtue in the attainment and possession of truth. In respect to the attainment and possession of moral and religious truth, I would go further. In this case, the possession of virtue and the living of an upright life is of *special* importance. A person who speaks on religious or moral truth *must* himself be morally upright if he is to be credible.

In our Gospel today (Mark 1: 21-28), our Lord enters Capernaum, and on the Sabbath day goes into the synagogue to teach. He is, of course, teaching on matters moral and religious — indeed, on what God had revealed to his chosen people, and on the true interpretation of this. What we notice in the Gospel accounts is that it was his absolute authority which struck his listeners. “*They were astonished at his doctrine, for he taught them as one having authority and not like the scribes.*” What was it that gave to them this impression of great authority? Yes, he spoke with complete personal assurance, without needing,

as did the scribes, to appeal constantly to other authorities. Yes, he displayed a complete command of the Scriptures. Yes, he seemed to know all things in relation to the moral and religious life, and in particular divine revelation. Yes, his judgment was unerringly correct. Yes, he backed his teaching up with the authority of miracles — as in our Gospel today. But what, I think, gave to his teaching a very special authority was his own manifest moral goodness and high holiness. He was the archetypal example of the one whose judgments and declarations are completely reliable precisely because of his moral virtue — other things, such as prudence and intelligence, being equal. He was a truly and manifestly holy Person, with all the moral virtues this must include. On one occasion when he was being attacked by the scribes and Pharisees, he challenged them with this question: *Can any of you convict me of sin?* On another he said, *I always do what pleases my Father.* He was sinless, and this gave to his teaching a most special authority. Indeed, this is precisely what the demon in the synagogue picks up. It challenges our Lord

by a public intervention. Jesus has been speaking with manifest authority, and the demon calls out: “*I know who you are, the Holy One of God.*” Of course, this title, “*the Holy One of God*” has deep Scriptural allusions. I cannot think of any prophet to whom this title had been applied. But it is *holiness* which the title emphasizes, and it is precisely this utter goodness which Jesus always displayed. It inevitably gave to his teaching an immense authority.

I suggest we take the point further. If we think of the gods of the religions of man, do they generally give the impression of possessing moral holiness? Is this what is perceived by their devotees? I do not think there is a notable stress on holiness in the depiction of the gods in the religions of man. They are powerful, and they must be worshiped if man’s interests are to be guarded. But I do not think they are perceived as models of *holiness*. The case is not thus in Revealed Religion. God is *the Holy One*, and he requires holiness. Now this, I suggest is one reason for the very authority of Revealed Religion. It comes from the Holy One, and it insists on holiness in

man. So, too, with Jesus Christ. As the demon said, he is *the Holy One*, and he is *of God*. No wonder his teaching carries unparalleled authority.

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Second reflection (Mark 1:21-28)

Christ strong and suffering The impression our Lord conveys in today's Gospel passage (Mark 1:21-28) is one of great and holy strength. Our Lord is possessed of effortless authority and power, directed against evil and error. He made a deep impression because "*unlike the scribes, he taught them with authority*", and "*he gives orders even to unclean spirits and they obey him.*" But let us bear in mind a point stated in the Letter to the Hebrews (2:10): "*it was appropriate that God, for whom everything exists and through whom everything exists, should make perfect, through suffering, the leader who would take them to their salvation.*" Our Lord, humanly speaking, was

brought to his peak through suffering. Powerful though he was, he passed through the way of suffering. So then, whether we are great or small, strong or weak, whatever be our talents or situation, suffering is the path to perfection and salvation — for Christ is our “*leader*.” His power and authority is manifest in our Gospel today, but his path was to be that of suffering. When suffering and difficulty come our way, suffering that offers no alternative, let us believe in its capacity for fruitfulness. There is in it, because of Christ our “*leader*,” that which will redound to our own good and through us to others. This it will be if we go through it with Christ.

Let us learn from the all-powerful Jesus the fruitfulness of the Cross. It can sanctify us.



Wednesday of the first week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Upon a lofty throne, I saw a man seated, whom a host of angels adore, singing in unison: Behold him, the name of whose empire is eternal.

Collect Attend to the pleas of your people with heavenly care, O Lord, we pray, that they may see what must be done and gain strength to do what they have seen. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Samuel 3:1-10.19-20; Psalm 39;
Mark 1:29-39

Then going out of the synagogue he came with James and John to the house of Simon and Andrew. Simon's mother-in-law lay in a fit of a fever: and immediately they told him of her. Coming to her he lifted her up, taking her by the hand; and immediately the fever left her and she served them. Then when it was evening, after sunset, they

brought to him all who were ill and possessed by devils and the whole town gathered at the door. He healed many who were troubled with various diseases and he cast out many devils, not allowing them to speak because they knew who he was. Rising very early, he went out into a desert place and there he prayed. Simon and those who were with him followed him and when they had found him said to him, "All are looking for you." And he said to them, "Let us go into the neighbouring towns and cities, that I may preach there also; for to this purpose have I come." And he continued preaching in their synagogues and in all of Galilee, casting out devils. (Mark 1:29-39)

The Saviour Jesus Christ was firmly part of the life and tradition of the chosen people. He was a son of David, a descendant of Abraham, a "devout Jew," we would say. He cannot be understood or imagined as separated or isolated from that people which had sprung from Abraham, which had Moses as its liberator and legislator, which had David as its grand king and which had the prophets for its teachers. He was, as soon as he

began his public ministry, counted as a prophet, as was John his precursor. He was considered not only as a prophet, but by some as one of the old prophets come back again. All this is to say that Jesus Christ was profoundly part of the texture of his people, and this was a direct feature of the Incarnation of the Son of God. However, there were striking differences from what had preceded him, not only in terms of his very Person, but in terms even of his prophetic ministry. We are so accustomed to reading in the Gospels of the healings of Jesus Christ and of his exorcisms that we have forgotten how striking and unusual was this feature in the history of Israel. Consider Abraham, the Patriarchs, Moses, Samuel, the greatest of the Judges, David and the prophets. Moses worked some great miracles — he brought down plagues on Egypt and parted the Red Sea — but did he cure the sick repeatedly and effortlessly? Did Samuel do this? Elijah and Elisha worked miracles, but none of the prophets worked so many miracles of healing and so effortlessly as did Jesus Christ. There was no physical affliction he could not heal, even to

raising people from the very dead. As a result vast crowds came to him for this single purpose, to receive healings. No other prophet in the history of Israel was importuned to such an extent for this purpose. In our Gospel passage today, we read that, having healed Simon's mother-in-law from her fever, *"when it was evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were ill and possessed by devils and the whole town gathered at the door. He healed many who were troubled with various diseases."*

This, of course, was not the principal focus of his ministry, but it is an aspect of it that stands out in the context of the prophetic tradition of which he was a part. Similarly, his expulsion of demons is virtually unique. Our Lord does refer to a ministry of exorcisms other than his own (Luke 11:19), but there is nothing like his ministry of exorcism described in the Old Testament. In fact, exorcism in the Old Testament is rare. One instance of it is the story of David's acting as King Saul's harpist when Saul was beset by an *"evil spirit from the Lord"* (1 Samuel 16:23). David's playing of his harp would bring relief to

Saul and the evil spirit would leave him. In the Book of Tobit, Sarah is plagued by a demon who has killed all seven of her husbands. Tobias is instructed by the angel Raphael to drive away the demon by burning a fish's liver and heart. Raphael follows the demon to Upper Egypt and binds him there. All this is a far cry from the powerful word of Jesus Christ commanding demons in plenty to leave and never to return. The demons cry out in terror or in a panicked bravado when Jesus Christ appears on the scene. His very presence seems to attract an infestation of demons and bring them to light — sending them packing in any encounter. So it is in our Gospel today that “*he cast out many devils, not allowing them to speak because they knew who he was.*” In all of recorded history, Christ is the premier exorcist and no-one remotely approaches him in his holy dominance of the netherworld. In these respects alone — which is to say, his innumerable healings, from the fever of Simon's mother-in-law to the raising to life of the son of the widow of Nain, as well as his effortless expulsion of demons from their human nests — in these

respects alone, Jesus Christ stands forth in sacred and secular history as unique. Of course, there are other unique characteristics of Jesus Christ — such as his very claims — but our Gospel today invites us to notice the power and the extent of his healings and his exorcisms. But then this has to be said: this was not the primary focus of his mission. It simply subserved it. He had come to preach and establish the good news of the Kingdom.

So it is that we read of him saying to Simon Peter, “*Let us go into the neighbouring towns and cities, that I may preach there also; for to this purpose have I come*” (Mark 1:29-39). His healings and his exorcisms were but signs of his power and ability to save. In fact, he had come to save his people from *their sins*, and not his own people alone, but all mankind. He was the Lamb of God, come to take away the *sin* of the world. The “healing” and the “exorcism” he had come to bring for all mankind was on a far grander scale than that exemplified in the healings and exorcisms recorded in our Gospel today. Let us take our stand with him then, for he is the Saviour and Lord.

Second reflection: (Mark 1:29-39)

Christ now the Lord over Death St Paul writes in his letter to the Romans that sin entered the world through one man and with sin, death. In the Letter to the Hebrews (Hebrews 2:14), the inspired author says that the devil had, prior to Christ, “*power over death.*” The death which entered the world as a result of sin was rendered the domain of Satan, and an instrument of his power. As such, death typically kept men from God both in the experience of it and in its upshot. By sin, death entered the world, and Satan gained the lordship over it. Death offered little hope and was naturally to be feared. But Christ by his own death took away this domain from the devil. His ministry of healing and exorcism (Mark 1: 29-39) was a sign pointing to his coming victory over death. He took away all the devil’s power and set free all those who had been held in slavery by the fear of death — especially by the

fear of what death contained. Death and what leads to it now is laden with grace and the presence of God, so that men need have no fear of it (provided they receive into their hearts the Good News). It is now, thanks to Christ, a path to very great union with God and abundant life, both in the experience of it and in its upshot. Father Patrick Peyton, the great promoter of family prayer, once said that he actually looked forward to death. For him it was the doorway to Heaven. Death is not something to be feared, rather it offers a great good if passed through in union with Christ. Christ is now the lord of life and of death.

Let us choose to follow Christ in dying daily to self, and resolving to die with him at our death.



Thursday of the first week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Upon a lofty throne, I saw a man seated, whom a host of angels adore, singing in unison: Behold him, the name of whose empire is eternal.

Collect Attend to the pleas of your people with heavenly care, O Lord, we pray, that they may see what must be done and gain strength to do what they have seen. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Samuel 4:1-11; Psalm 43;

Mark 1:40-45

A man with leprosy came to him and begged Jesus on his knees, If you are willing, you can make me clean. Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. I am willing, he said. Be clean! Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured. Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: See that you

don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them. Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere. (Mark 1: 40-45)

Compassion Suffering is unavoidable. That is not to say that certain sufferings are unavoidable — we can avoid the pain that comes from, say, the neglect of one's teeth or certain aspects of one's health. But it is impossible to avoid suffering in life. The world is so vast that it is impossible that it suit one's convenience at all times and in all situations. In any case, like everything else that is transitory we must deteriorate and come to our end, and this will involve suffering. But what compounds the suffering is if one suffers alone and without receiving sympathy and compassion. An elderly lady lives in her home and does not want to leave it. Her health is not good and she suffers many physical and mental frustrations, but

what intensifies her difficulties is that no-one seems to care about her. She has family, but they too do not show much compassion for and interest in her. They might even find her a bit of a nuisance, and wish she would agree to selling up and being committed to a nursing home. She feels her isolation and loneliness, and this leaves her somewhat embittered. If she were surrounded by compassion it would make so much difference, even in her declining health. She would be supported in coming to terms with the approaching end. Due to this lack of compassion for her, she might even be in danger of gradually giving up. By contrast, an elderly woman in her ninetieth year lives in her own home which she loves. Her powers are seriously declining and there is not much she can do. But her family surrounds her with love and compassion, assisting her constantly to do what she wants to do — such as getting to Mass frequently, getting to the doctor, to the dentist and to other outings when this is possible. This elderly woman feels that she is wanted, appreciated, and that no-one in her family wants to see her suffer. She has plenty of reasons to

live, despite what the euthanasia advocates would call her lack of “quality of life.” All has been made different by the compassion that surrounds her. How great would be the difference to her life were this to have been lacking!

Just as a person who receives little or no compassion can come to think that *her life* is meaningless, so there have been thinkers who have thought that *the world* is meaningless. Ultimately, they opine, the world is just a brute fact without meaning. It blindly surges along, and its inhabitants are favoured or crushed as chance may have it. It is ultimately a question of being lucky or unlucky, or forceful enough to command influence. Religion is just an opiate — as Marx famously put it. It is an illusion which serves to soften the blow or distract from effort. We might even say that the ultimate question about the world, as with an individual life, is whether there is compassion at the heart of all reality. What are the ultimate springs of reality and the universe? Does the universe have a heart, which is to say a heart of compassion, or is it just a brute? Such a question may not formally occur to many people, but they

would vaguely feel the issue. The elderly woman whose family surrounds her with love can count on compassion. She can count on being understood and assisted. Well, in some sense, can man count on Reality and the universe being understanding, being compassionate, being helpful — *in the last analysis*? To this vague but very basic question there has been an Answer coming from the Creator of all. It is that the infinitely transcendent Ground of all things, the Source from which all has come, is personal Love. Creation is a gift springing from love. But this very creation has been profoundly dislocated by man due to his sin, and thence comes the apparent lack of compassionate love which seems to pervade its workings. God is Love, and so in the final analysis there is Love. Man can count on that. The full revelation of this is the Person of Jesus Christ who is the Word made flesh, dwelling among us. This Love is his glory which has been seen — the grace and truth of Love. In our Gospel today the leper approaches Jesus. How hopeless his condition, how great his need for compassion! *If you are willing*, he

says to Jesus, *you can make me clean*. Jesus, filled with compassion, tells him, *I am willing. Be clean!*

We read elsewhere that “*when Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd*” (Mark 6:34). Again, seeing the crowds he said, “*I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat*” (Mark 8:2). Again, “*as Jesus approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out — the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, ‘Don’t cry’*” (Luke 7:12-13). Christ was overflowing with strong compassion, and in this he was the revelation of God. Whatever happens, even if we are not blessed with receiving the compassion of others, we may and must always rely on receiving the compassion of God.

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Second reflection:

Today Our Lord once said, do not worry about tomorrow, today has enough to consider and to deal with. Seek first the Kingdom of God and all these other things will be given to you. The great challenge is to make the very best of today, of the present, while learning of course from the past and planning properly for the future. The one thing that is in our hands is the day we are actually living. This means giving entirely to God our whole being this day, our prayers, thoughts, works, joys and sufferings. The morning offering of ourselves to God is very important. It means resisting the “hardening of our hearts” by the lure of sin — and doing so “today”. Every day we must fight sin — deliberate venial sins of thought, word and deed — for it is only by renouncing sin that we can remain united to Christ. But it is “today” that we must do this. We profit from the past by living fully in union with Christ “today,” by fulfilling as well as possible the duties of “today.” We prepare for the future, especially for the great future hour of our death, by living in union with Christ now, “today.”

Our treasure and our gift is the present, “today.” Let us live this today as if it is all we have.



Friday of the first week in Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: 1 Samuel 8:4-7.10-22; Ps 88; Mark 2:1-12

A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. So many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. Some men came, bringing to him a paralytic, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus and,

after digging through it, lowered the mat the paralysed man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, Son, your sins are forgiven. Now some scribes were sitting there, thinking to themselves, Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone? Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins He said to the paralytic, I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home. He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, We have never seen anything like this! (Mark 2: 1-12)

Forgiveness The public ministry of Jesus Christ was initiated by the prophetic ministry of John the Baptist. We read that “*the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He came to the*

neighbourhood of the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3: 2-3). In this he was fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah which spoke of a voice crying out in the wilderness: *Prepare for the coming of the Lord! Make straight the paths for him!* John’s mission was to exhort the people to prepare for the coming of the Messiah by repenting of their sins and embarking on a holy life. Multitudes came to him — but of course no-one considered that in his ceremony of baptism he was presuming to forgive sins. He exhorted them to repentance in view of “*the wrath to come*” (Luke 3: 7-9). His baptism was a rite in which people acknowledged their need of a cleansing, and in the washing then ceremonially given, they renounced their sins and entrusted themselves to the hoped-for pardon of God. But as I say, there is not the slightest hint in the Gospels that anyone considered that John himself exercised a power to forgive sins. Indeed, there is no prophet or priest or king before him who presumed to have the authority from God to do this. The forgiveness of sins was commonly thought to come from

the offering by the instituted priesthood of the prescribed sacrifices. But, at root, this was an act of obedience to God, acknowledging sin and entrusting oneself and the nation to his mercy. It was an act of faith in God that, seeing repentance and obedience, he would pardon the sin being thus acknowledged. It was not, as such, a case of an individual or a rite possessing a power to cleanse people of sin in God's name. Only God could do this, and it was always hoped that he was doing this. It could be said that one of the most distinguishing features of the Jewish religion was the prominence it gave to the holiness of God and to man's consequent need for forgiveness by him. As a religion it brought this point before the chosen people, and through them, before the world.

The Christian religion, coming forth from Judaism and counting itself as its divinely-ordained fulfilment, also taught the world that only God can forgive sins. Only he can effect a reconciliation between sinful man and himself. It also made clear that the divinely-instituted sacrifices and the priesthood of Judaic religion *do not of themselves* effect

this pardon and reconciliation. Indeed, a sense of this is reflected in the astonishment of the scribes at seeing Jesus presume to forgive someone's sins. We read that "*some scribes were sitting there, thinking to themselves, Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?*" I regard this response as suggesting that the scribes themselves did not regard even the sacrifices and the priesthood as having the power, as such, to do what Jesus so calmly presumed to do. No-one can forgive sins but *God alone*! On this, Judaism and Christianity are in utter agreement — and our Lord himself did not tell the scribes that they were wrong in thinking that *only God* can forgive sins. In fact, in almost every religion where man's sin and the holiness of God is recognized, it is allowed that only God can forgive sins. Such, too, is the teaching of Islam. But Jesus Christ calmly claims the power on earth to forgive sins, and the reason is, of course, that *he himself claimed to be God*. It was an astonishingly audacious claim to make so calmly, so unhesitatingly, and with such assurance before the religious

leaders who were so jealous of the uniqueness and sovereignty of God. He claimed the power to forgive sins, exercised it, and demonstrated the divine sanction for it by effecting in the very next minute an astonishing miracle. The paralytic, at Christ's mere word, arose from his mat and walked home to the wonderment of all. Just as Jesus Christ is the premier healer in the history of religions, just as he is the premier exorcist, so he is the premier *forgiver of sins*. In this he was unique in the religion of Israel, a religion so greatly defined by the thought of God's holiness and man's sins.

There is more. This power to forgive sins, exercised on this and on other occasions in our Lord's public ministry, did not end with his redeeming death. Precisely as a result of his salvific death, Christ gave to his Apostles this very power to forgive sins. He rose from the dead, and at his first meeting with them as an Apostolic college, he endowed them with the Holy Spirit and the power to forgive sins: "*Receive the Holy Spirit,*" he said. "*Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven them*" (John 20: 22-23).

Thenceforth, this blessing so readily given by our Lord to the paralytic, would be available to those who approach him. This blessing of the forgiveness of sins resides in the Church, and is granted by the successors of the Apostles and their ordained collaborators, the ordained ministerial priests. Let us seek it, then!



Saturday of the first week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Upon a lofty throne, I saw a man seated, whom a host of angels adore, singing in unison: Behold him, the name of whose empire is eternal.

Collect Attend to the pleas of your people with heavenly care, O Lord, we pray, that they may see what must be done and gain strength to do what they have seen. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Samuel 9:1-4.17-19;10:1; Psalm 20;
Mark 2:13-17

Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. Follow me, Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating

with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'? On hearing this, Jesus said to them, It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. (Mark 2:13-17)

Sin One of the most important of all intellectual disciplines is *philosophy*. In it, the enquirer seeks to know the foundations of various aspects of life and reality. In fact, every department of life can be the object of philosophical consideration: language, ethics, beauty, government and states (such as in the writings of De Tocqueville), religion, existence, science, law. Especially important for a genuine philosophy is the rational consideration of *religion*, which is especially to say, the being and nature of God, together with his will. Now, it is notable how much the prevailing trends in philosophy reflect the trends in culture. In an age in which culture is

religious, generally philosophy will be religious in character. The Middle Ages could be said to have reached the most penetrating levels of philosophical reflection on God ever to have been seen, and its greatest thinkers (such as Aquinas) remain reference points to our own day. On the other hand, the modern secular era has seen a more widespread presence of atheism and agnosticism in philosophy than ever before — allowing, of course, for the many excellent theistic philosophers of our time. I have a list of contemporary *theist* philosophers drawn from various countries, and there are many of them. But one gets the impression that a much higher proportion of philosophers are agnostic or atheistic. The basic issue of our Western-dominated age is the matter of God. Is God a figment of the imagination, or is he a Fact, and if so, what is he like? The tendency now is to regard God as a mere private persuasion, something which must publicly be relegated to the realm of optional personal opinion. I once read an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (December 20, 2010, p.9) by a professional philosopher from

Melbourne University. He declared himself to be an atheist, and his article was about how his family celebrates Christmas. “*Welcome to the modern atheist household,*” he wrote, “*I’m not anti-religion ... But our family has no God or gods.*” Every year his family celebrated Christmas, but “*without the baggage of Christ.*” Of course, very many do this, without being professed atheists. They live in a kind of informal, practical atheism.

There is no simple answer to the problem of atheism, if only because one cannot lead a person (including the atheist) where he does not want to go. As the saying has it, you can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink. As with any discipline or course of intellectual enquiry, a great deal depends on one’s dispositions. If one is disposed to consider something seriously, there is a chance that one will see the point. If one’s will is set against the matter, all is useless. That having been said, I would propose what John Henry Newman began with as a fundamental starting point: the testimony of the conscience to personal sin. Newman saw “sin” as basic to the human

condition as it is. Of course, the one who is atheist by profession, or who is virtually atheist in his practical living, has little sense of “sin,” and of course would reject the idea. “Sin,” in the nature of the case, is an offence against God, and therefore, he would say, it begs the question. However, even the atheist, agnostic, or indifferent would usually accept the existence of the *conscience* and its sense of *guilt*. If he accepts this, there is a chance he may come to accept the sense of *guilt before the One who is beyond* — in other words, God. I think that if we can see that “sin” is a primary and basic experience of life, we are on the way to a vivid recognition of God. Built on the living recognition of personal sin, philosophy can proceed with a fruitful consideration of the being and nature of God. I say all this by way of introduction to our Gospel today (Mark 2:13-17). The incarnate Son of God is eating with the tax collectors and the sinners — with those who were very aware of this basic fact of life, *that they were sinners*. This is a far cry from the modern atheist or agnostic. It is the sinners in our Gospel text who are found in the company of

our Lord. Our Lord said that he had come to call them. I remember reading an article by an atheist wife and mother. The article was entitled, “The Godless, Humanist Kids are all right.” No person who is aware of his sinfulness would say that of himself. It is the one who thinks he is *not all right* who seeks to be with Christ.

The scribes and the Pharisees asked our Lord’s disciples why their master was associating with sinners. Our Lord said that he was sent to those who were sick — and it is those who know they are sick who receive him. The deepest sickness is the sickness stemming from sin. These particular scribes and Pharisees, the atheist and the agnostic, the religiously indifferent or hostile, scarcely recognize that they suffer from the sickness of sin. Hence they have no interest in the divine physician. Let us not slip into the blindness of a loss of a sense of our personal sinfulness. Let us pray for the light to recognize it, and for the grace to take our stand with our Saviour.

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Second reflection:

Holding on to the Faith St Paul writes in the Letter to the Hebrews that “*Since in Jesus, the son of God, we have the supreme high priest who has gone through to the highest heaven, we must never let go of the faith that we have professed.*” (4:14). There are many ways we can let go of our Faith. We can simply fail to nourish it by not keeping to a proper plan of life of prayer, spiritual reading, and sacraments. But especially dangerous to one’s faith is entertaining occasions of sin, particularly sins against religious belief. Temptations of this kind are especially prevalent when a liberalism in religion is assumed to be an intellectual virtue. These temptations can come in the media, in books, conversations, television programmes on religion, presenting, for instance, certain interpretations of the Scriptures. To look at such programmes without a serious purpose and without an attitude of vigilance, lays one’s religious imagination open to corrupting influences. Every aspect of our being, especially our imagination, ought be fortified in the direction of a strong Christian

belief that will support the call to holiness. Many books and novels insinuate doubts about the faith in gripping and entertaining ways. Against all this we must be vigilant.

All these are occasions of sin of the most serious sort because they can lead to secret scepticism and unbelief. We must do all we can never to “*let go of the faith we have professed*”, rather believe with all our heart in the Christ proclaimed constantly by the Church.



Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 66 (65): 4 All the earth shall bow down before you, O God, and shall sing to you, shall sing to your name, O Most High!

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who govern all things, both in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the pleading of your people and bestow your peace on our times. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 49:3, 5 6; Psalm 40:2, 4, 7-10;
1 Corinthians 1:1-3; John 1:29-34

The next day John saw Jesus coming to him and he said, “Behold the Lamb of God, behold the One who takes away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, ‘After me there comes a man who is preferred before me because he was before me.’ I did not know him, but it is in order that he may be manifest in Israel that I have come

baptizing with water.” John gave his testimony, saying: “I saw the Spirit coming down as a dove from heaven and he remained upon him. And I did not know him. But he who sent me to baptize with water said to me: ‘The one upon whom you will see the Spirit descending and remaining, he is the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. I have seen and have given testimony that this is the Son of God.’”
(John 1:29-34)

Sin and Sanctity There have been many utopian proposals for improving the world and ridding it of its various evils — evils such as poverty, ignorance and illiteracy. There has been the dream of putting an end to all tyranny and political oppression, of ridding the world of wars, of ethnic strife and bloodshed, and establishing peace on earth. There has been the hope of eliminating disease and ill health. Especially important, there is often the cry to rid society of excessive crime, and to impose law and order. Time and again political parties, presidents and prime ministers are swept to power with the promise of a radical doing-away of rampant wrongdoing. But while

there is a ready recognition of the critical importance of ethical living, and of the elimination of crime, there is one great evil that we never see discussed in the public domain. Nor is it publicly recognised even as an objective evil as is, say, crime and unethical behaviour. Indeed, many would be embarrassed by a public discussion of it. Yet, directly or indirectly, it is at the root of almost every other evil from which man suffers. I refer to *sin*. By “sin” I do not simply mean various forms of *wrongdoing* — which by and large in common parlance are offences against society or one’s neighbour — whom, of course, we can *physically see*. While it is plain that “sin” is at the heart of true “wrongdoing”, nevertheless it cannot be reduced to mere “wrongdoing.” Sin is an offence not merely against society, but against *God*, whom we cannot see. When it comes to “evil”, we think of the sicknesses, diseases and natural disasters of the world. Do we think of the *sin* of the world? Do, say, governments? Is *sin* generally recognized? It is not. I have seen Satan depicted as a mere imp, a figure of myth, and private sin as, well, unimportant. One of the

things we must try to regain is a proper sense of sin and of its objective evil — which involves, of course, a recovery of a sense of God and a public recognition of him. Sin is the worst thing in the world, being the rebellion of man against his Maker, a disobedience that is secret, private, and yet often involving very public acts. There cannot be anything more catastrophic in the long term than deliberately to rebel against God, no matter how minor the disobedience may be, in thought, word or deed.

It is to God that we owe everything. On God do we depend completely. Yet the entire human race has been afflicted by and caught up in a rebellion against him — secret or overt as the case may be. We are all born into it. The first human pair rebelled against God — and the result was horrendous. This has reached and will reach all of their descendants. With their original sin, the human condition became one of separation from God and of profound moral dislocation. It is this broken and wounded condition, the result of the original sin of our first parents, that is handed on to all of us. We are all born under the

power of sin and with a constant proneness to personal sin. Yet it is commonly not recognized as man's primary affliction. As St Paul writes, with *sin death entered the world and death has spread to the whole human race*. If anything ought be our prayer, it is that God may enlighten man and society of the objective fact and evil of sin, and pour out his grace enabling man to renounce and overcome it. If anything has to be taken away from the world, it is *sin*. The question is, how can this be done? Let us imagine mankind recognizing the fact of sin, of man's proneness to it, and of its character as the fundamental source of evil in the world. The question that would cry out for an answer is, how could it possibly be taken away? Who or what could provide the answer? Just as, apart from revelation, the origin of sin is a mystery, so would be its solution. Our Gospel today (John 1:29-34) tells us the solution to the world's sin. It is told us in the words of St John the Baptist: Jesus, the Lamb of God, is he who takes away the sin of the world. God the Son became man to take away the sin of the world. Only he could do this — is it

remotely conceivable that any mere human being, or any numbers of human beings, could do it? What could a mere man, some great religious leader, for instance, do to remedy the world's separation from God? The very thought is impossible. God alone could do it, and it was God's plan that he do it by sending his divine Son to suffer, die and rise again. In this way he atoned for the sin of the world and won for man the gift of the Holy Spirit.

But there is more. Where sin abounded, grace abounds even more. Christ, by his redemptive work, has won for us the grace to be *saints*. St Paul in the second reading of today (1 Corinthians 1:1-3) greets those called to take their place among all the saints. If we take the means that the Church provides for us from what Christ entrusted to her, we can attain personal holiness and be transformed into the likeness of Christ. Where sin abounded, grace abounds the more. Let us look on Christ the Lamb of God and our Redeemer, resolving to follow wherever he goes. Let us renounce sin day by day and lovingly do the will of God in union with Christ, into

whose image the Holy Spirit is moulding us. Let us make
that our life's ambition, the ambition of each day.



Monday of the second week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 66 (65):4 All the earth shall bow down before you, O God, and shall sing to you, shall sing to your name, O Most High!

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who govern all things, both in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the pleading of your people and bestow your peace on our times. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever

Scripture today: 1 Samuel 15:16-23; Psalm 49;

Mark 2:18-22

The disciples of both John and the Pharisees used to fast. People came to Jesus and said to him, “Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast; but your disciples do not?” Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests fast as long as the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast.

But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. No man sews a piece of raw cloth on to an old garment. Otherwise the new piece pulls away from the old and a greater rent is made. And no man puts new wine into old skins. If he does the wine bursts the skins and the wine is spilt and the skins lost. New wine must be put into new skins.” (Mark 2:18-22)

Bridegroom The Old Testament has, in presenting its accounts of the creation of man and the world, a striking beginning. Further, when we think of the various accounts of the origins of the world that have been prevalent among the peoples, the opening sentence is especially striking: *“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and darkness covered the abyss..”* God then sets about creating the world, which is cast in the framework of a working week. At the end of this working week God rests — thus the believer has a divine model in all his life’s work and in his observance of the Sabbath. The last day of the week’s work is its climax. God has made the living things of the earth, and then, after that, he

makes man. But what is notable in the account is that man is created not just as one among the living things. He is made *in the divine image*. Now what is also to be noticed here is the sense in which this is so. In the first instance, man is made in the image of God in that he is given *dominion* over the world and all other living things. He is to multiply and exercise *dominion* over the earth. In that, he will be like God. While he himself is to be subject to God, as we read in the next chapter, all things in the world are to be subject to him. But now, there is a second aspect to his likeness to God. “*God created man in his image ... male and female he created them.*” Man’s vocation to, and state of, *marriage* is very much part of his likeness to his Creator. Man has a spousal vocation, and in this he is *like his Maker*. There is, then, a hint that the *Creator is somehow spousal* — and man is made in his image. I cannot but wonder whether this also served to remind the reader of a particular theme in the prophets, that God is the *Bridegroom*. While the book of Genesis contains traditions that developed during the Davidic monarchy and other

material that may well be earlier, most scholars believe its final shape and message come from the Exilic and Persian periods, which is to say, during the 6th and 5th centuries BC. Now, the minor prophet Hosea, for instance, exercised his ministry in the 8th century BC — probably well before the final compilation of Genesis — and a principal image of God in his prophecies is of a *Husband* to his people. Israel, God says, “*shall call me ‘My husband,’ ... I will espouse you to me forever ... in love and in mercy*” (2: 18-22). Many examples could be given showing that in revealed religion God is viewed as a Bridegroom.

Any devout Jew raised on the prophets would have been aware of this aspect of God’s revelation of himself. He is like a Husband, a Spouse, a Bridegroom in his love and fidelity to his people. Moreover, he was due to come. The Day of his coming was a defining thought in the culture of Israel, and it would be inextricably linked with the coming and work of the Messiah. Surprisingly, we read in the Gospel of St John that John the Baptist referred to *Jesus* as the “*bridegroom*”: “*You yourself are witnesses*

that I said, 'I am not the Messiah'... It is the bridegroom who has the bride.." (John 4: 28-29). John is referring to Jesus who is now attracting more followers than he. *"He must increase, while I must decrease"* (4: 30). Our Gospel passage today (Mark 2:18-22) is from a very different Gospel — that of St Mark, one of the Synoptics. In it, people come to Jesus and observe the difference between his disciples and those of the Pharisees and the Baptist in respect to fasting. In his reply, our Lord's portrays himself as the *bridegroom*. *"Can the wedding guests fast as long as the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast. But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast."* The image has its roots deep in Sacred Scripture, and, I believe, was a factor in the Genesis depiction of the creation of man in God's image. It recurs often in the prophets. It is mentioned by John the Baptist, is applied to the Messiah, and is appropriated by our Lord himself. He is Bridegroom to his people. It is taken up by St Paul who describes marriage as a sacrament of Christ

and his Church. He describes the relationship between husband and wife in the same terms: “*Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*” (Ephesians 5: 25-27). It is used by the author of the Book of Revelation: “*Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb*” (19:9). Let us as Christians cherish this remarkable image of the Bridegroom which God has used of himself, and which Christ has made his own.

Spousal love is the noblest thing in creation. It is the inspiration for songs, poems, drama, literature of all kinds, painting and music. It is God’s greatest work of nature — but it is so because it closely reflects his divine nature. He is one God in three Persons united ineffably in infinite love. God made man to reflect this, and — wonder of wonders! — God has entered the world to establish a spousal relationship with man. Christ is the Bridegroom, and we the Church — his spouse — are called to enter into an everlasting relationship of love with him by grace. Let this be our business in life, then!

Second reflection:

Priest and Victim Every baptised member of Christ's faithful has been given a share in the priesthood of Christ. The *kind* of share and the *way* it is exercised vary according to vocation. But all are called to unite with Christ as priest, offering Christ himself to the Father for the sins and needs of mankind. Moreover, all are called not only to unite with Christ as the One who offers — the Offer-er, but with Christ precisely as victim — the Offering. That is to say, our whole being and life is to be an offering. Our sufferings and our work, all that we are called to do by way of duty, all this is intended by the Father to be caught up in union with the offering that Christ made of himself as victim. Thus is our life meant to be a sacrifice of tremendous value because united with the sacrifice of Christ the victim. The Letter to the Hebrews speaks of Christ's priesthood. The Letter points out that while the priest in the line of Aaron offered up sacrifices

for sin, Christ as High Priest offered up his very self. He was not only the priest but the victim, offered not for his own sin as the traditional priest had to, but for the sins of mankind. As the traditional victim was slaughtered as a sacrifice, so too Christ underwent suffering and death as the one sacrifice.

We are called to be priests with Christ the Offer-er, and victims with Christ the Victim. This will give our ordinary lives an extraordinary value and meaning, with all its little ordinary duties.



Tuesday of the second week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 66 (65):4 All the earth shall bow down before you, O God, and shall sing to you, shall sing to your name, O Most High!

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who govern all things, both in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the pleading of your people and bestow your peace on our times. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever

Scripture today: 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Ps. 88; Mark 2:23-28

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the cornfields, and as his disciples walked along, they began to pick some ears of corn. The Pharisees said to him, Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath? He answered, Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need? In the days of Abiathar the high priest, he entered the house of God and

ate the consecrated bread, which is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions. Then he said to them, The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath. (Mark 2:23-28)

The Sabbath There were many things which made the religion of the Hebrews stand out among the religions of the ancient world. Most notably was its monotheism. There are some scholars who say that in its early stages, Israel did not deny the existence of other “gods”, but absolutely insisted on the worship of Yahweh God alone. There were to be no other gods in the life and worship of the children of Israel. These scholars assert that the formal denial of the very existence of other gods came in time as an unfolding of what was implicitly present, though not realized, in the original revelation. I suppose we could allow for this by saying that the “gods” of other peoples were in any case not perceived as the equivalent of Yahweh. They were imagined (by their devotees among the surrounding peoples, and by Israel as well) as limited

spirits of the unseen world, “deities” that in no way approximated to the ineffable “I AM” of the chosen people of Israel. These various spirits were imagined by their devotees as having different roles in the governance of the world. In the pantheon of gods in Greece and Rome there were high gods and lesser deities, but no high god was envisaged in the way Yahweh was by the Hebrews. Even if, for all we know, the strict monotheism of Israel underwent something of an historical development, it still stood out in classical times. Another virtually unique feature was the weekly Sabbath. As is natural with any living religion, feasts and religious celebrations abounded in the ancient world, including in Israel’s near neighbour, Egypt. But of course there was no *Sabbath* in Egypt, whereas in the religion of Israel the weekly Sabbath had very great importance. The weekly Sabbath was an essential element in the covenant of Sinai. It was the third of the Ten Commandments, one of the three that set forth Israel’s duties to God. There were to be no other gods before Yahweh; his name was to be hallowed; and the

weekly Sabbath was to be kept holy. The Sabbath was a linchpin of Revealed Religion, and the prophets inveighed on its behalf, insisting that it always be observed in proper fashion. However, as with much that God revealed, it prompted various interpretations — including those of the Pharisees.

In our Gospel today (Mark 2:23-28) the Pharisees observe the disciples of our Lord picking ears of corn and eating them on the Sabbath. At this they pounced, and demanded of our Lord an explanation. “*Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?*” Clearly, the Pharisees — to whom credit has to be given for greatly strengthening the post-Exilic observance of the Sabbath — placed any picking of corn in the category of work-a-day harvesting of corn. Plucking corn was therefore to be regarded always as being servile work. This interpretation was an extreme in rigidity, and its imposition on society fed the Pharisaical instinct for religious power and position. Our Lord, in response, denied that what his disciples had done was unlawful on the Sabbath, and

proceeded to show from Scripture that a proper understanding of God's Law served man's best interests. Our Lord, though, did not dream of lessening the place of the Sabbath. It was to be the Lord's Day in the week. The work of the week by which man sustained his life and exercised his dominion over creation, was to be interrupted so as to give God his Day. We may also say that this passage of the Gospel in which Christ rejects the interpretation of the Sabbath insisted on by the Pharisees, signals the different Christian understanding of the Sabbath rest. Christ gave to his Church a guiding principle: *the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath*. More importantly still, in this pivotal observance of Revealed Religion which is the Sabbath, *Jesus Christ is Lord*. The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath. By saying he is "*Lord*" even of the Sabbath, we may take it that our Lord is alluding not only to his being the master Interpreter of its observance — which was the issue in our Gospel today — but that he is and will be even its very Object. As *Yahweh* was Lord of the Sabbath, so is Jesus

Christ. Him we follow, and Him we worship — *on the Sabbath*. No prophet had ever claimed to be Lord of the Sabbath, but here in the midst of controversy with the religious leaders, Jesus Christ calmly makes that his claim.

The danger of our day, a day of secularism and of the absence of God, is not of an excessive observance of the Sabbath after the manner of the Pharisees. The danger is of forgetting it in part, or even altogether. The great majority of those who say they are Christians do not observe the Sabbath at all. It is observed for them by there being a weekly holiday from work, although this is disappearing too. So very many do not make the day holy, let alone by a religious celebration in church on Sunday. If we wish to follow Jesus Christ, we must take the observance of the Sabbath seriously, as he, Jesus Christ, would want us to. Let the Catholic, of course, never miss his Sunday Mass, and let him every Sunday strive to make Jesus who is his Lord, the Lord of the Sabbath.

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Second reflection:

Persevering to the end

St Josemaria Escriva

writes in *The Forge* that when it comes to seeking sanctity, it is easy to begin. The difficult and essential thing is to persevere, and to persevere to the end. The Letter to the Hebrews makes this same point: “*Our one desire is that every one of you should go on showing the same earnestness to the end, to the perfect fulfilment of our hopes, never growing careless*” (6:11). Perseverance to the end means persevering effort and work. It is possible more or less to retain goals in life, but without putting in much effort. Our Lord says elsewhere in the Gospel that we are to love God with our whole mind, heart and strength. This means earnestness. It means too, as that sentence in Hebrews states, “never growing careless”, but trying to fulfil our smallest duties really well, as well as possible so as to make them a worthy offering to God.

Let us take each day as it comes, beginning again each day. Now I begin! It means constantly repenting, turning away in genuine fashion from deliberate venial sin and fighting venial sin daily. Every day we are to persevere with earnestness to the end — to the end of that day — trying to do as well as possible whatever work the will of God asks of us, no matter how small.



Wednesday of the second week in Ordinary Time

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Collect Almighty ever-living God, who govern all things, both in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the pleading of your people and bestow your peace on our times. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever

Scripture today: 1 Samuel 17:32-33.37.40-51; Psalm 143;
Mark 3:1-6

Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shrivelled hand was there. Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. Jesus said to the man with the shrivelled hand, Stand up in front of everyone. Then Jesus asked them, Which is lawful on

the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill? But they remained silent. He looked round at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, Stretch out your hand. He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus. (Mark 3: 1-6)

Secret refusal

I have always found it intriguing that many who have subsequently received the highest honours of the Church for their heroic integrity and union with God were, *in their lifetime*, opposed and regarded not just as wrong-headed, but as less than good. It is a not uncommon pattern in history that those who were canonized as saints were vilified in life by those who knew them. That is not to say, of course, that all those who are vilified are good people. Some are vilified for good reason — precisely because they are evil. But there are others who are good and who are vilified. As a matter of fact, Christ warned his disciples that they must expect to receive the vilification and suspicion that he had received. As they

did to the Master, so will they do to the disciple, and this brings us to the mystery of Christ's reception among his own. He, the Word made flesh, *came unto his own, and his own did not receive him — but to those who did receive him he gave power to become children of God.* In our Gospel today we have an instance of the hostility to Christ which possessed many of the religious leaders. In reading the account, the Christian keeps ever in mind who Jesus Christ really was. He was God the Son made man. Not the slightest trace of sin could ever so much as touch him. He was absolutely holy, and was himself the source of holiness. His human nature was absolutely perfect in its moral character. The thought of this, even during Christ's hidden years at Nazareth, is enthralling. There was a Man in that obscure village of Nazareth, humbly and quietly working at his trade, growing up in the circle of his home, who was the all-holy God. We may presume that he was recognized in the town as a very good man, but this did not stop his townspeople from attempting to kill him when he returned to them after having begun his public ministry.

Once our Lord “showed his colours,” which is to say his true identity and mission, they turned him out. He was a sign of contradiction, and the same pattern manifested itself in his public ministry. So, too, in our Gospel today.

There is something awesome, terrible, striking about our scene today. The all-holy Son of God, become a man like us in all things but sin, was in the Synagogue teaching. The Pharisees were there, but towards this wholly admirable Person they were hostile. They were filled with suspicion. Now, what was at the root of their suspicion? Was it a pure zeal for their religion? We gain a clue from John’s account of the Passion. When the leaders brought Jesus before Pilate, we are told that Pilate knew it was from jealousy that they had delivered him up. Jesus himself had done nothing wrong. The source of the Pharisees’ desire to accuse Jesus was their jealousy. They could not bear his manifest spiritual authority, an authority recognized by the people, an authority Jesus himself exercised calmly, sovereignly and constantly. In the previous passages of the Gospel, they accuse our Lord of allowing his disciples to

break the Sabbath rest by their picking ears of corn. The Sabbath was pressed hard by the Pharisaical class, and, we may say, policed by them. But it served to bolster their sense of position and authority — and Jesus was continually ignoring their excesses and their strictures. He was allowing a much freer practice of the Sabbath rest, including his own ministry of healing on the Sabbath. So in our Gospel passage there they were in the Synagogue, intent on observing if he would violate the Sabbath yet again. They knew that the man with the withered hand was also in the Synagogue during our Lord's speaking. They knew Christ's compassion. Knowing their man, they expected him to do something for this poor unfortunate, and this would be their chance to accuse him. St Mark makes the point that this was precisely their motivation. It is a picture of sin in opposition to God. Even our Lord himself for all his divine power, seems unable to overcome their sinful stubbornness. *“Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill? But they remained silent. He looked round at them in anger and,*

deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, Stretch out your hand” (Mark 3: 1-6).

It would be a good thing for us to take for granted that there are lurking deep within our hearts certain elements of this same opposition to Christ and his holy will. In our desire for holiness of life, let us assume that there are some aspects of God’s will that we are secretly refusing. Well, let us at least *aspire to desire* those aspects of holiness that we do not as yet *want*. If we are stubbornly holding on to this or that sin, be it some failure to forgive, some attachment to this world’s goods, some area of self-indulgence, or some other way we are refusing to give Christ what he is asking for, let us start by genuinely *desiring to want* to give these things up. Let us ask for the grace to *desire* to accept Christ fully, and having been granted the desire, then to be truly faithful to it.

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Second reflection: (Mark 3:1 6)

The anger of God Our Lord is grieved to find his critics so obstinate in their opposition to him. *“Then, grieved to find them so obstinate, he looked angrily round at them, and said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ He stretched it out and his hand was better.”* In various parts of the Old Testament there are vivid descriptions of the anger and the wrath of God. In his anger God rained down fire and brimstone on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. The prophets spoke of the “anger” of God and the punishment he would bring on his people for their infidelity. Indeed, the Old Testament is commonly referred to as the book describing the anger of God, while the New Testament is said to reveal his love. This is a muddle-headed simplification of course, but at least it recognises the reality of the “anger” of God. Our passage today in Mark speaks of Christ’s “anger” at sin — and our Lord said, *he who sees me sees the Father*.

Let us avoid the anger of God by resolving to grow in a spirit of repentance every day. We must be prepared to recognise our sins and to repent of them. In the Scriptures, this repentant attitude is shown to bring down the mercy and compassion of God. Whereas, stubbornness in sin brings down, sooner or later, the judgment of God.



Thursday of the second week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 66 (65):4 All the earth shall bow down before you, O God, and shall sing to you, shall sing to your name, O Most High!

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who govern all things, both in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the pleading of your people and bestow your peace on our times. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever

Scripture today: 1 Samuel 18:6-9;19:1-7; Psalm 55;
Mark 3:7-12

Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lake, and a large crowd from Galilee followed. When they heard all he was doing, many people came to him from Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and around Tyre and Sidon. Because of the crowd he told his disciples to have a small boat ready for him, to keep the

people from crowding him. For he had healed many, so that those with diseases were pushing forward to touch him. Whenever the evil spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, You are the Son of God. But he gave them strict orders not to tell who he was. (Mark 3: 7-12)

The Person of Jesus I have never heard or read of any report or record of any kind in the history of the world which describes evil spirits doing what they did in our Gospel passage today. We read that “*whenever the evil spirits saw Jesus, they fell down before him and cried out, You are the Son of God.*” There is nothing remotely like this anywhere in the Old Testament. Nothing like this happened with Abraham or any of the Patriarchs, nothing like it happened with Moses. Perhaps the nearest thing in the life of Moses was when Pharaoh’s wise men and sorcerers, by their magic arts, threw down their staffs which were changed into serpents. They did this in response to the same thing that Aaron had done with his staff, as God had directed Moses. Then “*Aaron’s staff*

swallowed their staffs” (Exodus 7: 8-13). But all this is as nothing compared with the open acknowledgment of Jesus Christ by the demonic world. In fact, there are few references to the demons in the Old Testament. They can be counted on one’s hand. But in the Gospels a vast demonic cluster is present on the scene of Christ’s labours, and it is they who helplessly give utterance to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. They are portrayed as compelled to bow before him because of the matchless spiritual majesty they see in him, and from that prostration they shout out his grandeur. But Christ commands them to be silent. Our Lord had to contend with the confused and very material expectations of the people. So many longed for the Messiah — but it was for a political, economic and temporal Messiah that they longed. If the demons were allowed an audience for their shouts acknowledging his majesty, the cry may have been taken up by the crowds and our Lord’s proper mission would have been endangered. There were before our Lord people from all parts: “*Judea, Jerusalem, Idumea, and the regions across the Jordan and*

around Tyre and Sidon.” What would have happened if they took back with them to their localities the words about Christ coming from the rasping throats of the devils? A political movement may have swept the region. On one occasion, after our Lord had fed the multitude with a handful of food (John 6: 15), the cry went up that he was to be their king. Our Lord escaped to the hills.

Our Lord was driven by an all-consuming love for God’s chosen people. He was the one for whom God had been preparing his people for centuries. He was the Blessing for the nations which the children of Israel were to offer the world. His mission was to the beloved people of God, the people of God’s own choice, the House of Israel. He wished to draw them to him. As he said near the moment of his Passion while gazing on Jerusalem, how he wished to *gather them as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings*. This he was doing in our Gospel passage today (Mark 3: 7-12). They were coming to him in large numbers and from everywhere, and he wished them to come. He could give all that their hearts could desire. The

ever-present danger was that they would get what they wanted from him, and then stay with him or depart from him according as their immediate material needs were satisfied. They wanted health — and this was a good and legitimate aspiration. They wanted freedom from the evil spirits — and this was a better aspiration still. They wanted the light to live well and happily — and this was even better. Many simply wanted to be with him. But our Lord had come to give them the greatest relief of all, liberation from sin and the wherewithal for sanctity. It was this which mankind most needed, and it was the root of the evils that infested and spoilt the world. Jesus of Nazareth had come to take away the sin of the world, and to empower man to live in imitation of him. *This is the will of God*, St Paul would write, *your sanctification*. Christ had come to change their hearts of stone and to give them hearts of flesh — which is to say, a heart throbbing with the divine life that filled his own sacred heart. This was a magnificent prospect, but the danger was that few would be interested. Very many were seeking from him things

which he could certainly give, but which were of minor importance when compared with the blessings he had come to give, blessings that were eternal. He had come to make them holy. For this, our Lord had to lead them on but gradually, and his immediate success was limited.

Let us stand in spirit among the crowd in our Gospel today, gazing on the One speaking to us. Let us contemplate him. How wonderful it would be to be his friend! How wonderful it would be to share his life and his mission! How enviable the position of his chosen disciples. That is what I shall aspire to — a share in his personal friendship. Ah! By my baptism I do now share in his life and in his mission, and above all, he counts me as his friend. *I do not call you servants any more, he said. I call you friends, and I commission you to go out and bear fruit that will last.* Let us resolve to deepen our friendship with Jesus Christ, and to make it the meaning of our life.

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Second reflection:

The power of Jesus to save Whatever be our sins and whatever be the faults that hold us back from full union with God, Jesus can save us from it all. *This is the will of God*, St Paul tells us elsewhere, *your sanctification*. The power of Jesus to save is utterly certain. It is said that the sister of St Thomas Aquinas once asked her illustrious brother what one needs to do to become a saint. He is said to have replied: “Want it!” That is to say, we must have a great and persevering desire for sanctity, a desire that includes taking the means required. Jesus can endow us with this holy desire by his gift of the Holy Spirit and the grace that accompanies this Gift. However, he treats us for what we are, human beings with personal freedom. We are not robots. While our sanctification is the work of God and his grace, nevertheless we must cooperate freely and perseveringly, and in this way merit the reward of union with God.

The key to this persevering cooperation with the work of Christ in our life is always to be always beginning again: Now I begin! Let us take each day at a time, ever starting afresh with repentance and reliance on the power of Christ. The inspired author of Hebrews (7:25) offers immense hope: *“The power of Jesus to save is utterly certain, since he is living for ever to intercede for all who come to God through him.”* The power of Jesus to save is utterly certain. This fact must be our constant hope, and it must be the message of hope we bring to others.



Friday of the second week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 66 (65):4 All the earth shall bow down before you, O God, and shall sing to you, shall sing to your name, O Most High!

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who govern all things, both in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the pleading of your people and bestow your peace on our times. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever

Scripture today: 1 Samuel 24:3-21; Ps. 56; Mark 3:13-19

Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve- designating them apostles - that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons. These are the twelve he appointed: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them he

gave the name Boanerges, which means Sons of Thunder); Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. (Mark 3: 13-19)

The Church At the beginning of his *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (1864), John Henry Newman recalls some of the authors who were especially influential in his life soon after his teenage conversion. One of those authors was Joseph Milner (1744-1797), an English Protestant Evangelical writer. Milner was born at Leeds and educated at Leeds Grammar School and Cambridge. After taking his degree he went on to become headmaster of Hull Grammar School. He became a strong supporter of the Evangelical movement of the period (led by Wesley and Whitefield), and greatly contributed to its success in Hull. As well as being headmaster, he had charge of North Ferriby parish, about nine miles from Hull. Remarkably, as well as all this he published essays, sermons and books — the best known of his books being his *History of the Church of Christ* (London, 1794-1809), completing three volumes before his

death. The remaining two of the set were added by his brother, Isaac Milner (1750-1820), dean of Carlisle, who re-edited the whole work in 1810. It was this *History* which inspired in the teenage Newman a love for the early Church — and this in turn found its ultimate fulfilment in what the two Milners would have profoundly disapproved of, Newman's conversion to the Catholic Church nearly thirty years later. It is ironic that Newman's later conversion to the Catholic Church pivoted around the question of *what* the Church that Christ founded *is*. Milner's idea of the Church was the characteristic Evangelical one: the Church consists simply of those who are by conviction and by goodness of life united with Jesus Christ. In another of his books, his *Gibbon's Account of Christianity and Hume's Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1781), Joseph Milner defines the Church "in its Scriptural sense" as consisting "*of those, and only those, who are spiritually united to Jesus Christ as their Prophet, Priest, and King, or to say all in a word, their Saviour, and through him to God the Father by an everlasting Covenant*" (p.164). It

does not consist in any national or congregational body as such — and of course it certainly does not, for Milner, consist in the communion of churches presided over by the Church of Rome. His was a classic Protestant notion.

Newman went on to attain an outstanding knowledge of the early Church, and came to a very different view of the Church from that of Milner. The study of the early history of the Church, according to Newman, teaches one that the early Church was the Catholic Church. The Church does not consist *simply* of those who love Jesus Christ and are obedient to him. It is an identifiable and visible body with a definite structure, with a formal leadership which is the direct successor of the leadership which Jesus Christ himself instituted. At the heart of the Church which Christ founded is the Apostolic succession, which is to say the succession from the Apostles of the grace and mission which Christ imparted to them. It is this which we see in its first stages in our Gospel today (Mark 3: 13-19). Indeed, it is one of the many things which mark Jesus Christ out from all the prophets who preceded him.

There is no prophet in the entire Old Testament right up to and including John the Baptist who so actively sought disciples as did Jesus Christ, and who took the step of selecting twelve of them in the way he did. There were, we read, certain ones he wanted and whom he called, and from among these he selected twelve. Apart from the clear choice of the Twelve, the statement may also mean that our Lord called a number to be *disciples in a special sense*, and from these he chose the Twelve. We read elsewhere that our Lord sent out *seventy-two of his disciples in pairs* to go ahead of him announcing the Kingdom. St Paul tells us that *500 of the disciples* were present at one appearance of the risen Jesus. So there were *many disciples*, some of whom were actively associated with his mission, while many others were not. Our Lord had *special friends* who were not actively involved in his mission in a *commissioned* sense — such as Martha, Mary and Lazarus. In any case, *from them he chose twelve* — “the Twelve” — and these would be the foundation of his Church, with Simon the visible Rock of the whole structure. The point is

that there is a firm and clear Catholic teaching on Christ's intention for his Church. It is that the Church is a visible structure, embracing Christ's disciples, founded on the Twelve, and animated by the Holy Spirit. Christ abides in this divinely-instituted body. The Church, which is Christ's Catholic Church, has the mission to bring Christ to all.

In the Gospels Christ describes himself as the *bridegroom*, and St Paul explains that Christ is the *bridegroom of the Church*. For all the faults, sins and limitations of its members, the Church has Christ as its divine Head, and the Spirit of God for its animating principle — its soul, we might say. For this reason the Church is not a merely human institution, but has a magnificent divine element, which is the Holy Trinity dwelling within it as in his Temple. Let us love the Church then, and do all we can to be worthy members of her, so that the glory of Christ might shine the more before the world.

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Second reflection: (Mark 3:13-19)

Christ the mediator of the new covenant The work of our Lord continues on in history in and through his Church, which he established on the foundation of his Apostles. He appointed Twelve to be his companions and to share in his work of sanctification, of establishing the Kingdom of God within the hearts of men (Mark 3:13-19). The relationship that God has now established between himself and us, the New Covenant, is of a far higher order than its predecessor (Hebrews 8:6). Jesus our Lord is its mediator, just as Moses was the mediator of its predecessor. The Old Covenant, as the inspired Scriptures make plain, repeatedly failed. The people abandoned it time and again. So God resolved — and had planned from all eternity — to transform his people from within so that his law and the desire to keep it would be implanted in their hearts. God promised to sanctify his people from within the core of their being — and Jesus is the mediator of this sanctifying action.

It is to this work that we ought dedicate ourselves as part of the Church of the Apostles. Let us strive each day with apostolic zeal to bring this Kingdom to others.



Saturday of the second week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 66 (65):4 All the earth shall bow down before you, O God, and shall sing to you, shall sing to your name, O Most High!

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who govern all things, both in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the pleading of your people and bestow your peace on our times. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever

Scripture today: 2 Samuel 1:1-4.11-12.19.23-27; Ps. 79;

Mark 3:20-21

Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, He is out of his mind. (Mark 3: 20-21)

Christ's work

Shakespeare is a dramatist of genius, and together with his power to create drama, he is an eminent poet. As far as I am aware, we have no testimony from him as to what all this good literary work *cost* him. There are great novelists in the English language. Both in his own lifetime and since, John Henry Newman was acknowledged as one of the greatest prose writers in the English language, though his prose is expressed mainly in genre other than poetry, drama and novels (though he did write some poetry and two novels). But he always said that writing was for him a very great *labour*. It reminds us that for anything really good, intense work is usually required. We have to really work at what we are doing, if what we are doing is to be good. It is also the case that intense work for something truly worthwhile — in other words, good work — is man's happiness. It makes him happy, and his good work brings happiness to others. As well as this, good work done for love of God is sanctifying both of the worker himself and of the ones for whom the work is done. But there is no avoiding the fact

that good work is hard work, and there is no easy way to good work. The greatest works require the greatest of labours, and usually a truly successful work bringing great good to others has cost a great deal. It may even have cost the very life of the one who has brought it about, together with the lives of many of his collaborators. Now, if there is one impression we gain from the work that our Lord did during his public ministry, it is that it was intense. It was an explosion of work, from the moment it began. Our Lord did not gradually move into his prophetic activity — it began with a great shot, as it were, once his identity had been declared by John the Baptist, and once he himself had been baptized in the Jordan and received the Spirit descending on him like a dove. He was driven into the wilderness to confront Satan, and as soon as John was arrested, his own ministry began in earnest. He was on an unprecedented campaign, recruiting and forming Apostles and raising his many disciples. He was bringing in a Kingdom which would be established by his death.

I am sure that, while it was going on, there was nothing like Christ's incessant and powerful activity in that entire part of the world. We read that people came to him from Galilee, Judea, Idumea, the Decapolis, Syria — in other words, from the entire region on that part of the world's map. We read of scribes and Pharisees coming from Jerusalem to observe him. We read that Herod was hearing reports of him, and I would be surprised if Pilate had not heard reports of it too. During the trial of Jesus, Pilate received a message from his wife urging him to dismiss the case and not to lay a finger on that just man — she had had a terrible dream about it. Her dream could have been prompted, in part, from what she had heard of Christ's activity prior to that point. Vast crowds followed our Lord, doubtlessly for a variety of reasons, but it indicates the intensity of our Lord's apostolic service. We read in St John's Gospel that when our Lord was passing through Samaria, he *rested* at the Well of Sychar, while the disciples went in to buy food. Presumably our Lord was utterly exhausted, far more than they. On another occasion

they were together out on the Sea of Tiberius, and a severe storm suddenly arose, one that threatened their very lives. But amid all the turbulence, he was *asleep* in the heaving boat. His exhaustion must have been great, indicating a tremendous intensity of apostolic work. In the midst of all this work, he would spend at times the whole night in prayer to his heavenly Father. This is the context of our Gospel passage today (Mark 3: 20-21). The scene follows St Mark's presentation of our Lord's call of many disciples and of his choice of the Twelve to share his company and his mission. At this, "*Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, He is out of his mind.*" It may be that our Lord's wider family circle thought that he was absolutely "over the top," as we might say colloquially — in the degree to which he was spending himself for all and sundry. All felt they could press themselves upon him, and he was doing nothing to discourage it.

All of this was the manifestation of the love of Jesus Christ for each and every person. His food was to do the will of his heavenly Father, which was to save all of mankind from sin. The establishment of God's Kingdom was an undertaking without parallel in its scale in all human history. The point, though, is that Jesus Christ is prepared to do anything for each and all of us, that we might be redeemed and sanctified. *Christ loved me*, St Paul wrote, *and gave himself up for me*. Each of us can say that. The degree to which our Lord spent himself in his public ministry, continues in his efforts for each one of us. Let us then love Jesus Christ, placing ourselves in his hands, and joining him in his mission.

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Second reflection: (Mark 3:20-21)

Our work Our brief Gospel passage for today (Mark 3:20-21) gives us a picture of our Lord at work. Our Lord and his disciples were at such a pitch that they could not even have a meal. So consumed was he with his mission that his relatives were convinced that he was out of his mind. Every minute of our Lord's life was given over to the doing of his Father's will. One of the most crucial things in any person's life is the *attitude* he has to his *work*. So many people regard their work as a necessary evil that they have to do and get through, but it is hardly a positive thing for them. Yet in fact, each of us is called to work with love at what we have been given to do each day. Our proper work is a *calling*, whatever it might be. As Cardinal Newman wrote at the end of one of his greatest books, life is short, eternity long. We must fill up our life with good works, working in loving Christlike service of others in union with God. Whatever be our circumstances and our calling, all of us can do that. St Bernadette Soubiroux at the beginning of her last illness said, this is my last *job*.

She was implying that she intended to make a *good job* of it, a good and beautiful *work* of her suffering.

Let us sanctify our work, sanctifying ourselves and others by means of it. Let us fill up our lives with good work done in union with Christ. Let us make the work of each day a good and beautiful thing in the sight of God who has given it to us to do.



Third Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 96 (95):1, 6 O sing a new song to the Lord; sing to the Lord, all the earth. In his presence are majesty and splendour, strength and honour in his holy place.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, direct our actions according to your good pleasure, that in the name of your beloved Son we may abound in good works. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 8:23-9:3; Psalm 27:1, 4, 13-14;
1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 17; Matthew 4:12-23

When Jesus had heard that John was arrested, he retired into Galilee. Leaving the town of Nazareth he came and dwelt in Capharnaum on the sea coast, in the borders of Zabulon and Nephthalim. Thus was fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, “Land of Zabulon and land of Nephthalim, the way of the sea beyond the Jordan, Galilee

of the Gentiles: The people who sat in darkness has seen great light, and to those who dwelt in the shadow of death light has dawned.” From that point Jesus began to preach and to say, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” As Jesus walked by the sea of Galilee he saw two brothers, Simon who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea (for they were fishermen). He said to them, “Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Immediately leaving their nets they followed him. Going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in a boat with Zebedee their father mending their nets. He called them, and they immediately left their nets and father and followed him. Jesus went about all Galilee teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom. He healed all manner of sickness and every infirmity among the people. (Matthew 4:12-23)

Belief in the one God Each Sunday at Mass we recite the Creed after hearing the word of God in the Scriptures and the homily. The Creed proclaims the fact of

God. The Nicene Creed begins with the words, that “*I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.*” The alternative Creed, more often used in private prayer such as at the beginning of the Rosary, begins in similar fashion. “*I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.*” Both Creeds state that everything that exists (excluding evil, of course, which is the odious lack of something that categorically should exist) comes from and is sustained by the one God. There is one Being on whom everything depends — everything, down to the smallest existing element in all that there is, be it seen or unseen. All things come from him, and therefore all things have on them his imprint. There is then this most positive feature of creation, that everything can and should lead us to him. Let us often think of the implications of there being one God. All the other dogmas included in the Creed — our Lord Jesus Christ and what he did for us, the person and divinity of the Holy Spirit, the one holy Catholic Apostolic Church — all of these we believe on the word of the one

God who has revealed them. A profound sense of the sovereign reality that is God ought give us a firm belief in all that is contained in his revelation. His word is most sure because he is God, the Creator of all. So too, the Ten Commandments have him as their source and their authority. The first is the foundation of the rest, that we are to recognise him as the one and only God, and not have other “gods” in his place. The second is that his name (embracing his reality) is always to be hallowed, and never treated commonly, nor debased or profaned. The third is that his Day each week is always to be kept holy. The other seven commandments set forth his will in respect to our relations with our fellow-man. The entire Creed and the Ten Commandments are inextricably linked with the first and fundamental revealed truth that there is only one God, Creator of all. He is not just any “god,” but the one and only true God, the One who revealed himself to Abraham and Moses, and fully and finally in our Lord Jesus Christ.

In sum, everything, all our beliefs and our entire conduct, everything we see in us and around us that has any positive being, all has as its source the one God and Father of all. This first truth, this first article of the Creed and this first of the Commandments, is the foundation of all. He it is who revealed himself in the Old Testament, and then definitively in the New with the coming and the work of Jesus Christ. Christ revealed himself to be the divine Son of this one God, who is his own Father. Jesus Christ, equally with his divine Father, is the one and only God. He also revealed there to be in God a third divine Person, the Spirit of the Father and the Son. Together with the Father and the Son, the divine Spirit is to be worshipped and glorified. The one and only God is three distinct Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Christ has also revealed the divine plan to establish the Kingdom of God in the hearts of all. God has done this and continues to do it — in the Person of Jesus his Son, such that whenever anyone is united to his Son, the Kingdom of God is established within him, and he is established in it. This

Kingdom is present in its fullness in Jesus Christ, and one enters the Kingdom by uniting oneself with him. Our Lord said the Kingdom of God is within you — and this occurs when a person is united with Jesus. In our Gospel today (Matthew 4:12-23) we read how our Lord began his preaching with the message, “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand.*” In knowing and loving Jesus, we know and love the one only God, for he said that *he who sees me, sees the Father*. He is the way, the only way to the Father. *No-one comes to the Father but through me*, he said. But there is more. We come to know the revelation and teaching of Jesus his Son through the ministry of the Church, the Catholic Church which he founded, and of which he is the living head. The Church is his body. So if we wish to know, love and serve God as we are called to do, loving God with our whole mind, heart and strength, loving him in everything because everything depends simply on him, then all this is done through union with Christ. By divine intention, union with Christ is made possible through the life and ministry of the Church.

Everything stems from the fundamental reality of the one and only God, the Creator of all. Let us repeat constantly through life, I believe in the one God, Creator, Lord and Father of heaven and earth. This is the foundation. Let us ask God to establish his kingdom in our hearts through his Son Jesus Christ, and the ministry of his Catholic Church, of which we are blest to be members by our baptism. Let us never allow the slightest doubt about all that he has revealed to take root in our hearts. Let us live out that Revelation, knowing it will bring us to heaven to be with the one God forever.

Further Reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* no.200-227 (I Believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth).



Monday of the third week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 96 (95):1, 6 O sing a new song to the Lord; sing to the Lord, all the earth. In his presence are majesty and splendour, strength and honour in his holy place.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, direct our actions according to your good pleasure, that in the name of your beloved Son we may abound in good works. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Samuel 5:1-7.10; Ps 88; Mark 3:22-30

The scribes who had come down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebub, and by the prince of devils he casts out devils.” When he had called them together he said to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom be divided against itself that kingdom cannot stand. If a house be divided against itself that house cannot stand either. If Satan rises up against himself he is divided and

cannot stand. He is coming to an end. No man can enter into the house of a strong man and rob him of his goods unless he first bind the strong man. Then he will plunder his house. Amen I say to you that all sins will be forgiven men, and their blasphemies. But the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never receive forgiveness but will be guilty of an everlasting sin.” He taught this because they said, “He has an unclean spirit.” (Mark 3:22-30)

Holy Spirit There has always been some debate as to what that sin or blasphemy against the Holy Spirit which “*will never receive forgiveness*” refers to. It is a sin in which, in some sense, one must knowingly reject forgiveness — and in the context of today’s event, it is connected with an accusation that our Lord, whose inner life is the Holy Spirit, is in league with Beelzebub, and indeed, that he “*has Beelzebub.*” Let us, though, set aside that discussion for it would mean canvassing many views, and focus, rather, on the profound love and veneration for the Person of the Holy Spirit which it suggests. There are numerous instances given in the Gospels of our Lord’s

consuming love for his heavenly Father. St Luke tells us that the boy Jesus, when finally found in the Temple by his distressed parents after their heart-wrenching search of three days, said to them, *“Did you not know I must be about my Father’s business (or in my Father’s House)?”* There was our Lord’s dramatic act of driving out the sellers and the money changers in the Temple — *“Get all this out of here!”* he ordered, *“and stop turning my Father’s House into a house of merchandise”* (John 2: 16). *“I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth,”* he once prayed, *“for hiding these things from the learned and the clever, and revealing them to mere children. Yes, Father, for that is what it pleased you to do.”* He was continually referring to God as his Father in a way that appeared unique. God, he said, was *“my Father”* in a way that others could not say. That is to say, he was referring to God as his own natural Father, his Father by nature. God was his Father not merely in the way the nation could speak of God as Father to Israel, Father by adoption as his own chosen people — the *“son”* he had called out of Egypt. So unique and

personal was this relationship that some of the crowd at one point plainly asked our Lord, where is this “Father” of yours? (John 8: 19). St John makes it clear that the leaders knew exactly what our Lord was saying: he was saying that God was his Father in a sense that made him equal to God. Indeed, our Lord identified himself with Yahweh God: *I AM*, and for this they immediately took up stones to pound him to death (John 8: 58-59). God the Father filled the life of Jesus Christ his divine Son.

But we can forget the tremendous place of the Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus Christ, and our Gospel text today serves to remind us of it. The Holy Spirit is a divine Person, equal in every way to the Father, though not being what he is, the Origin. Just as the Son is equal to the Father, so the Spirit is equal to the Father and to the Son, because like each of them, he too is the one and only God. The Father is the Origin, the Son is his Only-Begotten, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from them both as their life of Love. There is but one God and each of the three Persons is that one God. But it is possible for us to slip into a view

of the Holy Spirit which — unconsciously — takes him to be a kind of divine force. While the Father and the Son are often depicted each with a voice and a face, the Holy Spirit has no clear face or voice to us, and is rarely depicted in art with a face — although sometimes in art he has been. He is depicted as he appeared in the Scriptures: as a dove, or as a tongue of fire, or perhaps as a powerful light, or the finger of God. Admittedly, in the Acts he also *speaks* to certain disciples and Apostles. But the result is that we can forget that he is just as much a *Person* as the other two, a Person distinct from the Person of the Father and the Son. How loveable he must be! How loveable indeed. He is the love of God, and how hidden, how modest, how much behind the scenes, and yet how intense his work to see the Son glorified! On one occasion our Lord invited all to come to him and to learn from him, for he is meek and humble in heart. Now, the Holy Spirit is the very spirit of Jesus Christ, and so the Holy Spirit is meek and humble — and does not his very obscurity, his hiddenness, his lack of a face as it were, bespeak this fact? He is content to be out

of sight in order that the Father and the Son from whom he proceeds might be glorified the more — and we are speaking of a divine Person! Together with the Father and the Son he is to be worshipped and glorified. In our Gospel today (Mark 3:22-30) our Lord speaks of the divine Spirit — and consider the love and veneration with which our Lord refers to him. You may blaspheme me, he says, and be forgiven. But be careful! Do not blaspheme the Holy Spirit! The Holy Spirit! The adorable, lovely, loveable, sublime, most holy Spirit! Do not blaspheme Him! Not *Him*, never *Him*! If you do, you will not be forgiven! Let us imagine our Lord's voice quivering with love and veneration as he spoke of the Holy Spirit.

It is plain, and needs scarcely to be said, that our Lord was profoundly devoted to the Holy Spirit. He repeatedly referred to him in the Gospels, especially during the Last Supper discourses in the Gospel of St John. Let us love the Holy Spirit, then, and never neglect him. As St Paul directs, let us not make *the Holy Spirit sad* by our sins. He is our Counsellor, our Friend, our Guide, our Teacher. He

it is who can make a saint of us, and only he. Let us pray to him daily for the gift of holiness during life, and for a holy death at the end, when we go to the House of our Father.

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Second reflection:

Sin The worst and most intractable problem of life and the universe is the presence of *sin*. Sin is what strikes at the root of our being, because at the deepest level of our being we are called to union with God in a moral life. This is our calling and our happiness, and yet all men are under the power of an opposite tendency that is handed on unfailingly to all. It is the tendency to disobey and reject God. How could sin be ever taken away if this is the state of affairs? How could man ever be freed from its grip? Jesus Christ made his appearance among us — as the Letter to the Hebrews says, “*to do away with sin by*

sacrificing himself” (9:26). He offered himself in death, and the purpose of it was to take away the sin of the world. Between that sacrifice he made then and when he comes again, his work of taking away sin is applied to each person who comes to him and unites himself in faith to him.

The great danger is that we will have little sense of the reality and importance of sin. If this is the case — and it is characteristic of modern western man — then Christ and his work will appear superfluous. It is if one genuinely desires redemption from sin and sanctification that Christ’s blessings will be embraced in faith. A sense of sin is at the heart of the Christian life. It is a basic. Let us pray for this sense of sin in ourselves and in others.



Tuesday of the third week of Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: 2 Samuel 6: 12-15.17-19; Psalm 23;
Mark 3:31-35

Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you." "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my

mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.” (Mark 3: 31-35)

God's will While it is true that many of the Greek gods were scarcely highly moral in the myths, in Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*, Euthyphro says that what all the gods love is pious, and what they all hate is impious. With that, Socrates asks the crucial question: *“Is the pious loved by the gods because it is pious? Or is it pious because it is loved by the gods?”* Socrates gets Euthyphro to agree that piety, if defined as *“what is liked by the gods”*, is liked by them for some reason. The pious is pious, not just because it is liked. The liking must follow from recognition that an action is pious, not the other way around. Thus the piety comes before the liking both temporally and logically. This is an important question, and it bears on the theism of religions. *“Is what is morally good commanded by God because it is morally good, or is it morally good because it is commanded by God?”* Catholicism answers firmly with the former alternative, but there are religious attitudes and positions that in effect answer with the latter. God

commands me to, say, inflict harm, so, for that mere reason, such a course is good. But no. What is immoral is such because it is immoral, not *simply* because God hates and therefore forbids it. This is why what is immoral is “sinful”: it “offends” God because God himself is holy and moral in his infinite Being. It is from the holiness of his nature that he creates, and he creates in accord with it. All that is created is thus constituted in accord with the moral character and law of God’s very being. Thus, while God abhors what is immoral because it is immoral, this does not mean that the moral law is, as it were, *superior* to God, and indeed, *independent* of God. It does *not* mean, taking the point further, that the moral law is in some way God’s *sovereign* — commanding obedience from him. This is the position that, in effect, has been reached by modern secular culture. There is no disputing the reality and supremacy of ethics — even though a whole range of major ethical norms are indeed disputed. What is denied is that God matters at all in the question of morality. That is to say, *ethics* (as understood and articulated by the moralist) is

presented as *supreme*, even though there may be very few if any ethical absolutes. *God*, though, is *not* at all viewed as supreme. Indeed, he is a figment, or even, in the religions and in his representatives, a flouter of morality and must be put down or driven from his privileged position in the moral life. But no. The Christian theist insists that the moral law derives its reality and force from the sustaining hand of God who holds all things in being – and God does so not according to divine whim but in accord with his moral character and being.

It is possible, very possible, for a religion to be immoral in its dictates. Its perceived gods can sanction immoral actions. A furious terrorist can appeal to his god for divine sanction in his murdering of innocent persons. He can call on his gods in detonating explosives tied to his body as he sends himself and many others into eternity. These gods thus stand exposed as nothing, and worse than nothing, because the moral law is flouted by appealing to them. There is no god but the God of objective, right, and absolute morality. It is also possible for one who professes

to believe in the God of our Lord Jesus Christ to blame this one true God for his own immoral deeds, saying he is made to commit them, and that he “can’t help it”. In such a case, the one true God has been made a myth and an idol. But no. It is God’s will that man act morally, and man serves God and remains in communion with him precisely by acting morally. We have not resolved to act rightly simply because to do so *happens* to please God who *happens* to have decided what it is to act morally. What is “pious” is not such simply “because it is loved by the gods”. Nevertheless, there is this to be said. At the core of the moral law and sustaining all moral requirements, there is the all-holy and moral Creator and Lord of all. It is he who sustains all things in accord with the law of his moral being. He can only love and *will* what is in accord with his moral nature. In *this higher sense*, what is right is so because it is the will of God. So it is that it is the highest motivation to wish to please God and to do his holy will. He wants me to do the right thing — because his will is that what is right and moral be done. I remain in

communion with him by doing as he commands because he can only command in accord with his moral being, just as he creates and sustains in being in accord with his moral being. Indeed, the best indication to me of what is the moral course to be followed is precisely his declared will. The commandments of the God of Revealed Religion, and not the gods of the myths, are the surest indicator of what is the right thing to do, because they come from the God who has created all things in accord with his moral law and being. All of this brings us to our Gospel today (Mark 3: 31-35), in which our Lord tells us who are those who are nearest his heart. *“Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.”*

As a matter of fact, it is the will of God that man go far beyond the mere *requirements* of what we may call natural morality, or the moral law apprehended by man’s intellect and the Ten Commandments declared by God. *This is the will of God*, St Paul declares, *your sanctification*. Christ has come to fulfil the true intent of

the Law. God, indeed, has commanded us to love him with all our heart, all our mind, all our strength. If we make it our life's business to do God's will with the aid of his grace, and not merely to be moral, not only will we be moral but we shall be made by him into saints. God's will is that we be sanctified in Christ — Oh, glorious plan indeed!



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Scripture today: 2 Samuel 7:4-17; Psalm 88; Mark 4:1-20

Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate

it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.” Then Jesus said, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.” When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. He told them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, “‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!’” Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away

the word that was sown in them. Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.” (Mark 4: 1-20)

The Word I suppose we could say that in the study and reading of history, there are two things to be done. Firstly, there is the work of getting at the facts: what actually happened? Secondly, there is determining what is much more difficult: the basic dynamic behind those things that happened. There is, let us say, a terrible tragedy. An airliner filled with passengers has gone down into the sea and all lives were lost. This was, let us say, deduced from the fact that it was while the aircraft was over the Pacific

Ocean that the last contact was made. There is not a trace, no debris, no bodies — all has simply disappeared. It is certain that the plane went down and, despite the difficulty, an earnest attempt is made by various institutions across the world to reclaim the wreckage and get to the bottom of what happened. A long and excellent investigation is sustained, and finally the facts of what happened come to light and are pieced together. On further investigation, the basic dynamic — in this case, the decisive causes — of the tragedy are also determined. It was due to human error, culpable though, in the maintenance of the aircraft. Even though many of the facts about the aircraft's flight are not known, or the account of them discovered later to be somewhat mistaken, the significant and all-important aspect of the matter, the one that holds the imagination of the world, is the neglect by the *maintenance department*. That is the human error. What would be the importance of a knowledge of the facts of the flight, if this all-important factor was unknown? Granted the knowledge of this culpable neglect, much of the rest of the details are

relatively unimportant. So it is, we might say, in world history. Knowing the facts is important and most interesting. But it is especially useful, not to say interesting, to discover — through personal reflection on the facts, assisted by the reading of penetrating and well qualified authors — the deeper dynamics at work in history. To give but one example of one who saw this, Christopher Dawson (1889–1970) was a British independent scholar, who wrote many books on cultural history and Christendom. He argued, for instance, that the Catholic Church was an essential factor in the rise of European civilization, and wrote extensively on the cultural role of religion. He employed a meta-historical approach to his subjects and saw the deeper elements and patterns in the story. Of course, such reflection on history will be governed by one's basic world-view.

I say all this by way of introduction to a point about sacred history, as presented by the inspired Scriptures. Much of the Bible is history — it is the narration of past events by different persons in the ancient world. Their

scrolls have been gathered and included with other genre to form the Bible. The five “Books of Moses” — the Torah or Pentateuch — are framed within the context of an historical narrative. Then there are the Books of Joshua, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Judith. There are also the Books of Maccabees. Many centuries of history are covered in these accounts. But did the (inspired) authors of them have the same *mindset* and *purpose* as would a modern Ph.D candidate preparing his thesis on, let us say, the work of William Bernard Ullathorne (1806–1889) during his seven or eight years in Australia? Obviously not. The interests and preoccupations of writers of history vary from generation to generation. John Lingard (1771–1851), English Catholic priest and writer of English history (notably his *History of England* volumes) was especially concerned to get at the *facts* of the case about, to give but one example, the Reformation in England. The mere facts, *he* thought, would speak for themselves and make his point. But the men of the Oxford Movement in *their* writing of history — especially

Newman — were and remained more interested in presenting clearly the meaning and lessons of history. Now, the Bible includes much historical detail, but it is pre-eminently the history of *God's plan* working itself out in history, especially the history of God's chosen people. It presents this deeper meaning and dynamic of history, and furthermore, it is *revealed*. Our aim in reading the Bible ought be to come to see what it is that the Holy Spirit is teaching us about *God and his plan*. In the Bible we come to know what God has endeavoured to *say* to his chosen people and to us, through what he did and said to them. That is to say, to put it simply, our aim ought be to hear the word of God whether *announced* by his prophets and especially by the promised Prophet, Jesus Christ, or made clear in what *God did*, especially in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. All this brings us to our Gospel today (Mark 4: 1-20), which is about the word of God, its fruitfulness and its obstacles. We ought read our Lord's parable and the explanation he gives of it, not just as a light for our own

personal lives, but as explaining the message and thrust of the Scriptures.

The Scriptures portray the word of God at work in the lives of numerous persons and in the life of God's chosen people, and indeed in the world. It portrays and illustrates its power to save, as well as the obstacles with which it is met in the hearts of men, and the consequences of the frustration of its saving purpose. I suggest that the Scriptures be read in the light of our Lord's words in today's Gospel. They provide a key to the Scriptures handed to us by the Word of God incarnate. Our life ought be summed up in this grand statement: *Man does not live by bread alone, but by everything that comes from the mouth of the Lord.* Deuteronomy says it, and our Lord repeated it. *The Word of God*: that is the Key!



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Scripture today: 2 Samuel 7:18-19.24-29; Psalm 131;

Mark 4:21-25

Jesus said to them, Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear. Consider carefully what you hear, he continued. With the

measure you use, it will be measured to you- and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. (Mark 4: 21-25)

The Lamp Our Gospel passage today follows on our Lord's parable of the sower sowing seed in the ground. The seed that falls on the good soil bears fruit — thirtyfold, sixtyfold, a hundredfold. This harvest is especially holiness in one's own life, and holiness in the lives of others. It includes the harvest of souls, won by a constant apostolate. So it is that today our Lord uses the parable of the "*lamp*" being placed "*on its stand.*" The Gospel is at various times referred to as the "*light*" of Christ. We remember the primordial setting before the creation of the heavens and the earth, as narrated in the Book of Genesis 1: 1-3. On the one hand there is *God*, there is his hovering *spirit or breath*, and there is his *word*. On the other hand, "*The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the abyss*" — the *abyss* was imagined by the inspired compiler as darkness and lack of

order. His description reflected the helplessness of man where there is no light. The first thing God does is to create light: *“darkness covered the abyss, and the spirit (or breath) of God hovered over the waters. Then God said, Let there be light.”* That light dispelled the darkness of the abyss that obtained prior to creation. It depicts the radical act that is creation. At one point there is no world, at the next point there is the world, and this by God’s act. At one point there is darkness, at the next point there is light, and this by God’s act. St John begins his Gospel with statements which parallel and develop with a new revelation the statements that begin the Book of Genesis. In his Prologue, he stresses the light that dispels the darkness. *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”* John the Baptist came to bear witness to the Light who is the Light of every one coming in to the world. Thereafter, in his Gospel, John often depicts Christ as the Light of the world.

In our Gospel today, our Lord uses the parable of a lamp. A lamp is brought in to be held aloft in the house for all to see — it is not hidden under the furniture. This is because what would otherwise be hidden must be able to be seen. *“Jesus said to them, Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don’t you put it on its stand? For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open.”* We may presume that in a general sense our Lord is referring to the Gospel. It is meant for the world, and those who have been blessed with hearing it have the responsibility to bring it before others. It will light up all that is otherwise in the darkness, and without it all will indeed be in the dark. It is said that the Christian religion is the most populous in the world, present, of course, in numerous forms and creeds. The greatest of them is the Catholic religion. But now, great in depth and number of adherents as the Catholic religion may be, how many are living it genuinely, and how many are endeavouring to bear witness to it? Very many do not. However, there is an

ironic contrast in this respect. Fifty years ago the number of Catholics who attended Sunday Mass was much higher than it now is, but then (it is generally recognised) a notable feature of Catholic life was that the propagation of the faith was left by the laity to the religious professionals — the priests and religious. The Second Vatican Council endeavoured to rectify this aberration by insisting that all members of the Church are called to holiness of life and to a share in Christ's mission. The situation now is that a lower number of Catholics attend Sunday Mass, but it may be that a higher proportion of practising lay Catholics participate actively in the Church's mission. Many think that, despite all the difficulties of the second half of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, the Church is poised for a springtime of holiness and mission. When this might happen is not at all clear, but lay Catholics are spearheading various areas of witness to Jesus, and seminaries are beginning to burgeon. The call to bear witness to Jesus as the Light of the world is catching

fire in the hearts of very many. A tremendous amount still needs to be done, but there are impressive signs of life.

Whatever the case may be as to the present facts, our Lord's words in today's Gospel are clear. *"If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear. Consider carefully what you hear,"* he continued. *"With the measure you use, it will be measured to you- and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him"* (Mark 4: 21-25). Those of us who are blessed with the knowledge of Jesus Christ have a great responsibility to bring him who is the Saviour to others. If we do this, more will be given to us. If we refuse, what we have we may lose. Let us take up the challenge, then, of loving and serving Christ, and bringing him to the world.



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Scripture today: 2 Samuel 11:1-4.5-10.13-17; Psalm 50;
Mark 4:26-34

Jesus said: "The Kingdom of God is like a man who cast seed on the ground. Night and day as he sleeps and rises the seed begins to grow, how he does not know. Of itself the earth brings forth its crop, first the blade, then the ear, afterwards the full corn in the ear. When the produce is ready he immediately applies the sickle because the

harvest has arrived.” He said: “To what shall we liken the kingdom of God? Or to what parable shall we compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed which when it is sown in the earth is smaller than all the seeds in the ground. When it is sown, it grows and becomes greater than all other shrubs and puts out great branches, such that the birds of the air are able to dwell in its shadow.” With many such parables he spoke the word to them according as they were able to hear. He only spoke in parables to them, but privately to his disciples he explained everything. (Mark 4:26-34)

The Kingdom When the Hebrew thought of kingdoms, his heart dwelt lovingly and longingly on the kingdom of his forefather David. Though not Judaism’s first king (which was Saul), David established the kingdom, and of all the kings of the chosen people he was the greatest. He had received the prophecy that was thenceforth handed on, that his throne would in some sense be eternal. The prophecy developed as the generations passed and it became clear that a great Messiah was to

come who would establish God's Kingdom and be its King. He, the Messiah, would be the fulfilment of the prophecies. In Jesus of Nazareth this King had now come, and our Lord in his preaching and teaching repeatedly explained and described this Kingdom. We have a portion of his teaching on the Kingdom in our Gospel passage today. Firstly, the Kingdom would grow — and grow of its own power. *“The Kingdom of God is like a man who cast seed on the ground. Night and day as he sleeps and rises the seed begins to grow, how he does not know. Of itself the earth brings forth its crop, first the blade, then the ear, afterwards the full corn in the ear. When the produce is ready he immediately applies the sickle because the harvest has arrived.”* The source of this growth that our Lord is describing here is grace, given to the Church through the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Church is the bearer and the great beneficiary of grace which is the life and friendship of God. This grace surges through the Church's veins, is active in her preaching and teaching, is conveyed in her Sacraments, and is bestowed on her

children enabling them to live in the friendship of God and bring this friendship to others. It is the hidden power of God at work in the life of the Church. It accounts for her growth throughout history amid the waves of difficulty that afflict her. Cardinal Newman considered the first three centuries of the Church's history and her triumph over the Roman Empire to be a paradigm of this growth. The life and power of God are shown in the Church's silent but victorious growth amid the tremendous and sustained persecutions of those centuries.

While other kingdoms rise and then fall, this divine kingdom on earth will not fall. The kingdom and civilization of Egypt grew and lasted for very many centuries, and more spectacularly still so did that of Rome. But they eventually fell. Such has been the pattern of the kingdoms of this world all along. But our Lord assures us that God's kingdom which he, Jesus, established and of which he is the King will not be like that. It will inexorably grow and will embrace the peoples. It will far outclass all other kingdoms. *"To what shall we liken the*

kingdom of God? Or to what parable shall we compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed which when it is sown in the earth is smaller than all the seeds in the ground. When it is sown, it grows and becomes greater than all other shrubs and puts out great branches, such that the birds of the air are able to dwell in its shadow” (Mark 4:26-34).

As he stood before Pontius Pilate on trial for presuming to be a king, he told Pilate that he was a King, yes, but that his Kingdom was not of this world. It was in the world, but not of it. Were it of this world he, its King, would be using the weapons of the world and with those weapons his forces would be liberating him from captivity. But no. His kingdom was of a different order. It was the Kingdom of truth, for he had been born into this world *to bear witness to the truth, and those who were of the truth listen to his voice.* So, at its heart, our Gospel passage today is speaking of our Lord himself as the King, and those who gather with and in him are members of his Kingdom. He himself is the great treasure of God’s Kingdom, and it is in him that God’s Kingdom is found and accessed. St Paul

writes in one of his Letters that this is the mystery now revealed — or, we could say, the Kingdom now revealed — *Christ in you, your hope of glory*. Christ's reign will grow and grow and it will be eternal. The birds of the air will find their shelter in him. By our baptism and membership in the Church we live in him and thus does the Kingdom of God grow.

The Kingdom of God is to be found in the Church Christ founded because Christ is to be found in his body the Church. Christ is the treasure and fullness of God's Kingdom and that treasure is to be found in his Church. Let us take our stand with Jesus, knowing that in him, as St Paul writes, is to be found *the fullness of the godhead bodily*. In him there is *every heavenly blessing*. He is our living Lord, joy for all ages.

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A second Reflection

The value of Suffering The New Testament is clear that sufferings will come to the one who has embraced the light of Christ. But it is one thing for sufferings to come. It is a further thing to have the endurance that is necessary to do God's will in the midst of that suffering, and thus to gain what he has promised. *"You will need endurance to do God's will and gain what he has promised"* (Hebrews 10:36). It is, then, critical that we acquire this endurance. For this to happen we must look at the sufferings that spring from believing in Christ and doing God's will. We read that *"the righteous man will live by faith"* (Hebrews 10:38). This means viewing the sufferings that arise from doing God's will as the bearer of divine blessings. This is proven for us by the sufferings of Christ. The greatest of blessings flowed to us from his passion and death. As a result, the suffering of the one who lives in Christ is now laden with fruitfulness. If we are to endure in doing God's will, we must learn to look on

everything, including suffering, with the eyes of faith — seeing it as Christ saw it and as he taught it.

If we live by faith in this way, God’s presence and his Kingdom that is within us will grow like the seed that “*is sprouting and growing, how he does not know*” (Mark 4:26-28). Our sanctification and transformation in Christ will be going on. Let us then resolve in union with Christ to accept and even embrace (as he did) the suffering that is involved in doing God’s will.



Saturday of the third week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 96 (95):1, 6 O sing a new song to the Lord; sing to the Lord, all the earth. In his presence are majesty and splendour, strength and honour in his holy place.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, direct our actions according to your good pleasure, that in the name of your beloved Son we may abound in good works. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Samuel 12:1-7.10-17; Psalm 50;

Mark 4:35-41

That day when evening came, Jesus said to his disciples, Let us go over to the other side. Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on

a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, Teacher, don't you care if we drown? He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, Quiet! Be still! Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith? They were terrified and asked each other, Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him! (Mark 4: 35-41)

Lord of the world

There is a scholarly position which maintains that the ancient kingdom of Israel, dating, say, from Solomon, was something of a maritime power. Indeed, there is evidence that during the pre-monarchical period, the tribe of Dan was a maritime force. It is stated in Judges 5:17 “*Gilead, beyond the Jordan rests; why does Dan remain in ships?*” Interestingly, Egyptian and Greek sources record that one of the tribes of the Sea Peoples, a sea raiding people in the eastern Mediterranean at that time, were called the “Danauna” or the “Danaans.” I Kings 9:26 27 records that King Solomon built a fleet at “*Ezion geber*” on “*the Red*

Sea in the land of Edom.” II Chronicles 20:36-37 records that Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah “*built ships to go to Tarshish — the fleet was built at Ezion-geber*”, where Solomon had kept his fleet. The project was scuttled — the ships were wrecked and unable to go. The point I am making is that there is evidence from the Scriptures that there was a long tradition of the Hebrews being at home with the sea. I say this in opposition to another view which depicts the Hebrew as profoundly fearful of the sea, and as shrinking from contact with it. Moving closer to the setting of our Gospel for today, the *Sea of Galilee* (also called the Lake of Tiberius) must have, like the rest of the Galilean topography, shaped the culture and sensibilities of the surrounding population. There is on display in the region a restored fishing boat discovered deep in the mud of the Lake, a fishing boat large and impressive, conjuring up the thriving activity associated with the deep and extensive waters. One may presume that the people of Galilee loved their inland Sea, just as they loved the hills and plains of the region. Doubtlessly there were tragedies

and drownings, but for generations beyond memory it must have resourced a thriving fishing industry and presumably recreational excursions. Among our Lord's Twelve there were highly experienced fishermen who knew their Sea thoroughly. In our Gospel today we read that *“when evening came, Jesus said to his disciples, Let us go over to the other side. Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat.”*

Let us note that it was “evening” when Jesus and his disciples entered the boat and set out across the Sea. It suggests that the disciples knew their Sea well, and had no apprehensions about travelling across it in the dark — although there may have been the light of a full moon to guide them. Further, it must have seemed that all was perfectly well for a long pull across the Lake at night — and our Lord himself quickly fell asleep, exhausted as he was with his unremitting apostolic labour. There they were, quietly pulling across the water, rising and falling slightly with the ebb and flow of the swell. Christ was sound asleep in the stern, his head on a cushion. All was

calm, peaceful, with a low murmur of conversation, all anxious to ensure a rest for their beloved and revered Master. Suddenly the environment began to change. A wind unaccountably arose, the waves increased in strength, the boat rocked and heaved the more, and the fishermen — undoubtedly used to changes in the Lake, braced themselves for action. But within a short time, let us imagine say, fifteen or twenty minutes, the situation was far, far more serious. In fact, it had become the like of which they had perhaps rarely seen or been caught up in. The Sea was now in a tremendous turmoil, the wind was roaring and the waves pounding. The boat was awash, and these experienced fishermen were now filled with the utmost alarm. The situation was out of control and absolutely beyond their own excellent capacity. They were facing death at sea, a total loss of ship and life, with their Master going down with everything. But he, to their astonishment, slept on in seemingly profound oblivion of the situation around him. In his sleep he showed not the slightest concern. We read that the disciples vigorously

woke him and expostulated in their desperation. The rest is described by Mark — which is to say, by Peter, whose recollections probably constitute this Gospel — and the disciples gaze on as Christ, like the Creator himself at the beginning of Genesis, utters his word. He *“rebuked the wind and said to the waves, Quiet! Be still! Then the wind died down and it was completely calm”* (Mark 4: 35-41)

Christ spoke to the raging elements, and instantly there was calm. It was an act of the Creator, God become man. Christ showed he was Lord of heaven and of earth, the One in whom we can completely trust. He asks of us faith in him. *“He said to his disciples, Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith? They were terrified and asked each other, Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!”* Let us take our stand with him, knowing that, whatever be the storms that arise in our life as we make our way across the sea of life to our homeland, if Christ is with us, all will be well. Let us never be separated from him, then!

Second reflection:

Living and dying by faith Our Lord, risen from the dead, said to Thomas: “*You believe because you have seen. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.*” I know a leading Australian theist philosopher who has written that philosophical reasoning alone will not bring certainty about God and the things of God that are unseen. The Letter to the Hebrews tells us that “*faith ... is the conviction of things not seen*” (11:1). This is of vital importance all through life, but especially at the moment of death. The whole of life is building up for the moment of death. We must live well in order to die well, and a good and holy death will be a good life’s greatest achievement. What a difference there is between the man who has no faith in what God has revealed of the unseen, or who has lost the faith he once had, and the man who approaches the great moment of death full of faith! There is a certainty, a joy, a confidence in him, a trust in God’s mercy that the

other needs but utterly lacks. It is then that it becomes obvious that man was made to believe. Man was created to have faith.

Let us resolve to hold fast to our faith — to believe in what God has revealed — daily. We must never allow the slightest doubt in God and his word to take root in our hearts. It is our faith that takes us to heaven.



Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 106 (105):47 Save us, O Lord our God! And gather us from the nations, to give thanks to your holy name, and make it our glory to praise you.

Collect Grant us, Lord our God, that we may honour you with all our mind, and love everyone in truth of heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Zephaniah 2:3; 3:12-13; Psalm 146:6-10;
1 Corinthians 1:26-31; Matthew 5:1-12a

Seeing the multitudes, Jesus went up a mountain, and when he had sat down his disciples came to him. Beginning to speak he taught them, "Happy are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Happy are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Happy are the meek, for they shall possess the land. Happy are those who hunger and thirst after justice, for they shall have their fill.

Happy the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Happy are the clean of heart, for they shall see God. Happy are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God. Happy are those who suffer persecution for justice' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Happy are you when they revile you and persecute you and speak all that is evil against you untruly, for my sake. Be glad and rejoice, for your reward is very great in heaven. For so they persecuted the prophets that were before you.” (Matthew 5:1-12a)

Happiness The 1776 Declaration of Independence of the United States of America proclaimed that “*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*” So one of the truths declared to be “self-evident” was that all men have the right to pursue “Happiness.” This right comes from the “Creator.” Let us notice two things about this Declaration. Firstly, the word “Happiness” is capitalized — man’s happiness is thus

presented as sacred. But what is “Happiness”? It is just as evident that men can have a mistaken notion of happiness, and with tragic results. Many can think that “Happiness” will come from the greatest enjoyment of this world’s goods. Various religious leaders have arisen in the course of mankind’s history to correct this and other notions of happiness, but some of them have not arrived at the truth of human happiness either. In fact, it is one of the most elusive goals of all. If only the *path* to happiness were revealed to us by the Creator! — the Creator whom the Declaration of 1776 refers to. In fact, God *has* revealed it, and has done so in Jesus Christ. But this leads to the second thing to be noticed about the Declaration. The “Creator” is mentioned, as are, in a preceding passage, “the Laws of Nature” and “Nature’s God.” A later passage refers to “the Supreme Judge.” But *Jesus Christ* is not mentioned. Many of the leaders of the Congress of July 1776 were Deists, most notoriously the principal architect of the Declaration, the famed Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson accepted a deistic god and admired Jesus as a moral

teacher, but rejected the Trinity. The Christian Revelation is that God's plan for man's "Happiness" is revealed principally in the Person of Jesus Christ his Son. "Happiness" comes from following Jesus Christ as man's Redeemer and his God. It comes from union with Jesus Christ by grace, in a life of love for God and neighbour, and following in the footsteps of Christ. Our true "Happiness" consists in abiding in Jesus Christ by grace and living according to his way. Christ is the "Happiness" of man.

In today's Gospel (Matthew 5:1-12a) our Lord spells out what this means. "Happiness" is not having material wealth, or prevailing over others, or many other things which man in the course of his history has presumed will bring him happiness. Rather, our Lord says, Happy are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Happy are the gentle. Happy are those who mourn. Happy are those who hunger and thirst for justice. Happy are the merciful, the pure of heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted in the cause of right and because of their fidelity

to Christ. All these desires and possessions of the heart, so different from those prized by ordinary Reason and the world, are what will bring true happiness. Indeed, these pointers to true happiness coming from our Lord actually present us with a picture of *his* mind and soul. If we want to know how to interpret them, we ought take each of these Beatitudes and think of *Jesus* as the one who embodies them. They reflect the mind of Christ, and St Paul says in one of his Letters, “*Let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.*” Further, our Lord said that “*he who sees me sees the Father,*” so the Beatitudes reflect also the mind of the Father. The Father is poor in spirit; He is gentle and merciful. They also describe the Spirit of the Father and the Son. We are God’s children, and our happiness will come from being in union with him and in being like him. Now the danger for most of us consists not in rejecting this outright and in seeking our happiness in a way that is simply contrary to what our Lord directs and describes. It lies, rather, in not choosing to be wholehearted in our choice for him and for what he has revealed. We tend to

seek our happiness in both God and the world, both in Christ and in what Christ says will not bring happiness. We tend not to be thoroughgoing in our choice for Christ, and in his way to happiness. We must resolve to seek our happiness in God alone — which will include, of course, enjoying the blessings that God has given us in this life, such as normal material security, normal health, friends, family, status and good reputation. But “Happiness” cannot be reduced to these temporal things, and at times it is present though they are taken away.

Above all, it will mean seeking God and his holy will. It means putting God and his will before all other pleasures. It means living according to the mind of Christ and being attached to that, rather than to the things of this world. We are called to use the things of this life in the way our Lord did and would. They must never be taken to be our happiness. Christ is the happiness of man. Let us put Christ first, seeking first the kingdom of God.



Monday of the fourth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 106 (105):47 Save us, O Lord our God! And gather us from the nations, to give thanks to your holy name, and make it our glory to praise you.

Collect Grant us, Lord our God, that we may honour you with all our mind, and love everyone in truth of heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Samuel 15:13-14.30;16:5-13; Psalm 3;
Mark 5:1-20

Jesus and his disciples crossed the sea to the country of the Gerasenes. As he stepped out of the boat, immediately there came to him from tombs a man with an unclean spirit. He had been dwelling in the tombs and no one could now restrain him, not even with chains. Having been often bound with fetters and chains he had burst the chains and broken the fetters in pieces. No one could tame

him. He was always day and night among the tombs in the mountains crying and cutting himself with stones. Seeing Jesus afar off he ran and revered him. Crying out with a loud voice he said, "What have I to do with you, Jesus the Son of the most high God? I adjure you by God that you not torment me." For he said to him, "Go out of the man, you unclean spirit." And he asked him, "What is your name?" He said to him, "My name is Legion, for we are many." He besought him repeatedly that he would not drive him away out of the country. There was there near the mountain a great herd of swine, feeding. The spirits besought him saying, "Send us into the swine that we may enter them." Jesus immediately gave them leave. The unclean spirits going out entered the swine, and the two thousand or so herd with great violence was swept headlong into the sea and there were drowned. Those who looked after them fled and told everything in the city and in the fields. The inhabitants went out to see what had happened. When they came to Jesus and saw the one who had been possessed sitting, clothed, and mentally

recovered, they were afraid. Those who had witnessed everything recounted it to all, explaining what had happened to the possessed man and to the swine. At that, they began asking him to leave their district. When he went into the boat, the one who had been possessed began to implore Jesus that he might remain with him. But Jesus would not permit it, and told him, “Go to your house and to your friends, and tell them how great have been the things the Lord has done for you and his mercy towards you.” He went his way and began to broadcast in the Decapolis the great things Jesus had done for him. Everyone marvelled. (Mark 5:1-20)

To each his mission We read in Mark 10: 46-52 that while Jesus passed through the streets of Jericho a blind man called Bar-Timaeus cried out loudly to him, *“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”*. This prayer moved the heart of Jesus, who stopped, had him called over and healed him. As the Gospel narrates, Bar-Timaeus, who had now come into a world of physical light, *“followed him on the way.”* It seems, then, that he became a disciple of

the Lord, and associated himself with him. Further, we notice that “the way” Jesus was taking was the way to Jerusalem which he enters amid acclaim, where he cleanses the Temple and teaches extensively in it, and where he has his Last Supper and undergoes his Passion, Death and Resurrection. We may presume that Bar-Timaeus was faithful to our Lord throughout all of this, and may even have been among the 500 who, according to St Paul, witnessed the risen Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:6). We read that Mary Magdalene was cured of being afflicted by seven demons. She became an ardent disciple and associate of Jesus Christ, attending to the apostolic band, and being one of the first to meet him on his rising from the dead. These persons were privileged to have been touched by the saving power of Christ and were received into his friendship and his very company. They accompanied him along his way. Many others were formally invited by him to be part of his company. How great a privilege! We read that a young man of great moral promise came to Jesus, who looked on him with love, and invited him to leave all and follow him

(Mark 10: 17-27). This priceless invitation was turned down. But now, let us turn to our Gospel today (Mark 5:1 20), in which our Lord arrives across the Lake into “*the country of the Gerasenes*” — a largely pagan territory. Presumably he has come for rest with his disciples and to instruct them at greater leisure. Immediately a man, driven by the demons that have him in their possession and acting as their mouthpiece, presents himself. Through him the demons plead that they not be disturbed. But of course our Lord drives them out. I do not wish here to reflect on the demons, but on the man who was delivered of them. Specifically, let us notice the mission given to him.

He was completely restored, mind, body, spirit, emotions, all. One could imagine a person being delivered of actual demon possession, but being left shattered by mental debilitation. In John Henry Newman’s novel, *Callista*, Juba is possessed by a demon — and it is a punishment for his terrible pride. The possession lasts, and while he is eventually delivered of it, it leaves him physically and mentally ruined. He is eventually restored

by the intercession of the martyr St Callista, and then he dies. In the case of our possessed man today, he is immediately restored in every sense. What is to be noticed is that he earnestly wishes to remain with Jesus and to follow him. He also appears, once restored, to be a good man. This itself may indicate that his own possession had not primarily been due to moral failure, for it may be that our Lord restored him to his original condition, including his original moral condition. In his case we are conjecturing, but in the Gospels demon-possession did not necessarily indicate moral failure because at least one of the cases of demon-possession which our Lord terminated was that of a boy (Matthew 17: 18). In any case, the man, now restored to his full capacity, immediately wishes to follow Jesus Christ. That is to say, he wished, like others across the Lake in Galilee and Judea, to follow him along the way. But — and this is the point I wish to highlight — *Christ did not allow him*. His insistent request was refused. Our Lord was firm — no, he could not come with him in the boat, he could not leave all behind, and follow him

physically. As against the rich young man, that was not the path to perfection for him. That is not to say that he was not called to be a disciple of Jesus Christ — but he could not follow him physically along the way. He had a different calling, and Christ gave it to him. He was to stay among his pagan countrymen who had just asked our Lord to leave them, and tell all of the good things God had done for him. The man was not aggrieved, but obeyed Jesus Christ. He accepted his proper calling and mission “*and began to broadcast in the Decapolis the great things Jesus had done for him. Everyone marvelled*” (Mark 5:1-20).

We have no idea of this man’s subsequent life. I like to think that he continued on in the mission given him by Christ, and, being told eventually of the Resurrection, the Ascension and Coming of the Spirit, became a Christian and member of the Church, dying eventually in the faith. That is pure speculation, and it may not have been so. But one thing is clear, that he must have pleased God for fulfilling the mission and accepting the direction given to him by his divine Son Jesus Christ. He did the will of God,

and so our Lord would have counted him among his brethren (Mark 3:31-35). Let us learn from our Gospel today to do the one thing necessary, which is to do what God wants of us, and to do it with faith and love.

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Second reflection:

Grace in human weakness If we have any sense of the reality of ourselves we will realise that we are weak. We are weak in so many ways. The Church teaches that we are called to be saints, not workers of notable and famous deeds — though of course those who are called by God to do such deeds are also called to be saints. No, the course of life of most will normally be ordinary and relatively unnoticed. Our work in life will usually be made up of countless little things that nobody will ever take much notice of. It will seem as if we sink like a stone, when our time comes to depart this life. Nevertheless this

is the work which God in his providence sets before us each day, a work made up of numerous daily duties. We are called to do this ordinary work with as much love and excellence and obedience to God as is possible for us. It will require that we be *hidden, unnoticed* heroes of faith following the little way of ordinary life.

But we are weak. Let us take all the means God gives us prayer, sacraments, spiritual direction, and a habit of always starting again.



Tuesday of the fourth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 106 (105):47 Save us, O Lord our God! And gather us from the nations, to give thanks to your holy name, and make it our glory to praise you.

Collect Grant us, Lord our God, that we may honour you with all our mind, and love everyone in truth of heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Samuel 18:9-10.14.24-25.30-19:3;
Psalm 85; Mark 5:21-43

When Jesus had crossed over the Lake in a boat a great multitude assembled together before him, and he was close to the sea. There came one of the rulers of the synagogue named Jairus, and seeing him he fell down at his feet. He implored him saying “My daughter is at the point of death. Come, lay your hand upon her that she may live.” He went with him and a great crowd followed him

thronging around him. There was a woman who suffered from an issue of blood for twelve years. She had undergone many treatments from various physicians and had spent all that she had and was nothing the better for it, but rather worse. When she heard of Jesus she came through the crowd behind him and touched his garment. For she said, "If I touch but his garment I shall be whole." Forthwith the source of her blood dried up, and she felt in her body that she was healed of the evil. Immediately Jesus knowing in himself that power had proceeded from him, turned to the multitude and said: "Who touched my clothes?" His disciples said to him, "You see the multitude thronging around you and you say, who touched me!" He looked around to see who had done this. The woman fearing and trembling, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell down before him, and told him the truth. He said to her: "Daughter, your faith has saved you. Go in peace, and be freed of your infirmity." While he was still speaking, someone came from the ruler of the synagogue's house, saying: "Your daughter is dead: why do you trouble

the master any further?" But Jesus heard what was said and said to the synagogue official, "Fear not, only believe." He would only allow Peter, and James, and John the brother of James to follow him. They came to the house of the ruler of the synagogue and he saw a commotion with people weeping and wailing a great deal. Entering he said to them: "Why do you make all this fuss and weeping? The girl is not dead but is sleeping." And they laughed him to scorn. But having put them all out, he took the father and the mother of the child and those who were with him, and entered in where the girl was lying. Taking her by the hand, he said to her: "Talitha cumi," which means, "Girl, I say to you, arise." Immediately the girl rose up and walked. She was twelve years old. They were greatly astonished. He charged them strictly that no one should know of it, and he directed that something should be given her to eat. (Mark 5:21-43)

Christ loves me

There is no doubt that a principal (human) obstacle to our Lord's work and mission was the religious leadership of the Jewish people. After all, they were the ones who engineered his death. Repeatedly in the Gospels we see "*the scribes and Pharisees*" spying on our Lord, watching intently to catch him out in something he said, disputing hotly with him. They enter into league with the Sadducees for the same purpose. We read of conflicts with Synagogue leaders who object to our Lord healing on the Sabbath in the Synagogue. However, we must not imagine that the whole of the ruling class was against our Lord, and especially must we not imagine that our Lord himself was hostile to persons of that class, or of any class. We are perhaps reminded of this by our opening scene in the Gospel of today. Our Lord had crossed over the Lake of Tiberius and a great multitude of people gathered before him. We read that there came one of the *rulers of the synagogue* named Jairus, and seeing him he fell down at his feet. He implored him saying "*My daughter is at the point of death,*

come, lay your hand upon her that she may be live.” Now, our Lord had a large crowd before him, and may have been in the midst of instruction — but it looks as if he suspended what he was doing and immediately went with the Synagogue leader to his home. The man’s daughter was at the point of death. Christ’s compassion was for all, high or low. On another occasion it was a Roman centurion. A deputation came asking our Lord to come to the centurion’s house to cure his servant. This Jesus immediately set out to do. We see him accepting invitations from the Pharisees to dine at their table — we would find it hard to imagine John the Baptist doing this, but our Lord mixes with all, and enters into their settings, whatever and wherever they may be. Our Lord shows his readiness to serve those of position. During his Passion, he speaks with dignified courtesy to Pilate who was reluctantly doing his job, though in the event because of human respect and fear for his position he failed miserably in it and Christ went to his death. It was only the state of a person’s heart which blocked out the love of Christ for

him. Thus, he refused to speak with Herod, and thus he condemned many of the Pharisees and scribes.

So it was in our Gospel today — our Lord accompanied the Synagogue ruler, with the large crowd that had previously gathered, also in tow. They thronged around him and behind him, wanting to be near, and wanting to see what would happen next with the Synagogue ruler. But unknown to all, there was in the midst of the pressing crowd an unnoticed woman bearing her burden of physical suffering. She kept with the crowd and got closer and closer to our Lord himself. Then at a certain point she saw her chance. If only she could so much as touch his garment, she would be well again after all these years of fruitless treatment. She was one of the little ones, not one of the great. All, perhaps, knew the Synagogue ruler, perhaps not many knew her. At least, for sure, she was not one of the “important” people. But that is not how our Lord viewed the matter. She reached out and grasped part of our Lord’s cloak. Immediately a thrill of physical well-being flowed through her entire body.

Warmth and wholeness took possession and she had not the slightest doubt that she had been instantly cured of her long-lasting malady. At this she slowed, then paused, and for a few seconds the crowd surged on past her. But Christ had stopped. He stopped, turned, and looked around, with the crowd coming to a halt and his immediate disciples in wonderment at his wanting to know who “touched” him. There he stood, gazing intently at the crowd of ordinary people before him. He was looking for someone who had “touched” him and who had been cured of a significant illness. We notice, incidentally, a combination here of divine and human knowledge — as Son of God he *knew* a miracle had been worked by him, while as man he wanted *to learn* who it was. But behind this was his compassion for and interest in the ordinary, little, unknown person. He did not just pass on, allowing the miracle to happen and do its work — he wanted to show his personal love for the individual who had been in so much need. The Gospel text tells us what then happened. The woman not only had her cure, but the upshot was that she went away having had a

personal meeting with the Saviour, with instruction from him, and the assurance of his personal love for her.

In the case of both the Synagogue ruler and the unknown woman lost amid the crowd, our Lord showed a personal care. He stopped in the case of both and attended personally to their needs. He loves each one of *us* individually, whether we be high or low, and whatever be our situation and difficulty. In one of his Letters St Paul writes, *Christ loved me and gave himself up for me*. If we wish to be a disciple of Jesus Christ we must lay the foundation of a strong conviction that *Christ loves me* — me! On the basis of this, and with the help of his grace, we endeavour to give our lives to him out of love in return. But the basis of all is Christ's love for *me* and for *us*.

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Second reflection:

The fight against sin One of the very famous books of Catholic spirituality is the *Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola*. The fundamental point from which the *Exercises* begin is the foundational meditation which sets forth why we are created. We are created to love God above all things, and so we must be detached from all that may come between us and God. Our whole attachment of mind and heart ought be to God, leading us to actively cast off anything that turns our hearts away from God. In the Letter to the Hebrews we read, “*With so many witnesses in a great cloud on every side of us, we too then, should throw off everything that hinders us, especially the sin that clings so easily, and keep running steadily in the race we have started*” (12:1). Let us notice a detail: “*we should throw off everything that hinders us, especially sin*”. There are the deliberate venial sins of every day “*that clings so easily,*” and that all too often we do not really fight. But while we must “especially” throw off *sin*, there are other hindrances as well, such as various *attachments* (such as

love of our comfort) which may not be deliberate sins, but which nevertheless hinder us in the race we have started at our baptism.

We are called to attain sanctity, a union with Jesus that is total. To reach this, we shall have a fight on our hands. The great danger is that we shall constantly try to avoid the fight against sin, and settle down to a peaceful coexistence with it. *“Let us not lose sight of Jesus, who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection”*. Let the living Jesus live by faith in our hearts, and lead us through the fight to life eternal with him.



Wednesday of the fourth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 106 (105):47 Save us, O Lord our God! And gather us from the nations, to give thanks to your holy name, and make it our glory to praise you.

Collect Grant us, Lord our God, that we may honour you with all our mind, and love everyone in truth of heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Samuel 24:2,9-17; Psalm 32:1-2, 5-7;
Mark 6:1-6

Jesus left there and went to his home town, accompanied by his disciples. When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed. Where did this man get these things? they asked. What's this wisdom that has been given him, that he even does miracles! Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and

Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us? And they took offence at him. Jesus said to them, Only in his home town, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honour. He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith. (Mark 6:1-6)

Faith It is not at all unusual for a philosopher in the modern age to be an atheist or at least an agnostic. Generally, he professes to go on the *evidence*, and never on *faith*. To go on “faith” is scarcely rational, he typically believes. Antony Flew (1923-2010) was, in *this* respect, a typical representative of his discipline — he belonged to the analytic and evidentialist schools of thought, and was notable for his interest in the philosophy of religion. During the course of his philosophically influential life, he was a strong advocate of atheism and argued that one should presuppose atheism until empirical evidence for a God presents itself. There is nothing wrong with thinking that the fact of God is not self-evident (with the proviso that God may be *implicitly* known), but Flew’s assumption

was, of course, that *empirical* evidence for a belief was always and strictly required. Anyway, as is well known, in his old age he famously declared an allegiance to deism, which is to say an acceptance of the God expounded in Aristotle's writings. This, he was convinced, was what the evidence required — the evidence being the order or design that was manifest in the world. This was indeed the favoured argument of the old deism of the eighteenth century men such as Thomas Jefferson. Thomas Paine once stated that the only church he accepted as authoritative was the church of his own reason, and the only God which reason taught was the creator of our ordered and designed world. Flew accepted this position — it satisfied his reason, and it kept to the evidence. According to Flew, there was no room, of course, for any supernatural revelation from that supreme Designer, nor for any transactions between him and individual human beings. The only impressive arguments for "God" are the scientific forms of teleology (i.e., finality and ends), pointing to an Aristotelian God of power and intelligence.

Despite all this, there was no afterlife, nor was this God a source of good — after all, look at all the evil in the world! It seems, too, that his new theistic position rested on the origin from DNA of the first reproducing organisms. For Flew, you cannot account for this on the basis of nature alone. The origin of life (living matter) and the complexity of nature requires a super-intelligence. Mindless matter alone cannot do it. Further, from the day he declared his “conversion” right to the end of his life, Flew was very firm that he was not a Christian.

One can only rejoice that Flew got further than his miserable atheism. One must presume that he was sincere and meant well, and he certainly did well in terms of recognition and status in his profession. But he scarcely got far, and what was the reason for this? Doubtlessly there were many reasons, but one was his assumption that “reason” — understood as strict demonstration from empirical evidence — was the only reasonable path to certitude. This assumption was itself a powerful *faith* which he had accepted, and it clouded his intellectual

advance thenceforth. What he forgot, or rarely seems to have adverted to, was the pervasive presence and place of faith in ordinary human certitude and understanding. Man is acting on faith continually, and he recognizes this as most reasonable. It is perfectly reasonable to accept the word of persons who are seen to be reliable — but let us not digress into such a discussion. I mention Flew simply as an instance of a prevalent modern assumption. It is that faith is unreasonable and that the only sure way of being certain of something is to test it by strict logic and empirical evidence. It is important that we be aware of what we tend to assume, and our tendency to despise faith, including religious faith. Of course, religious faith can amount to an unreasonable credulity, but it can be equally unreasonable to be incredulous in the face of the word of the greatest authority. All of this brings us to our Gospel today (Mark 6:1-6), in which the Son of God incarnate declares himself to be amazed at the lack of faith in him by his own townspeople. Ominously, this lack of faith hampered his freedom to pour on them his blessings.

“Jesus said to them, Only in his home town, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honour. He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith.” If there is one thing which is evident in each of the four Gospels, and indeed in the rest of the New Testament, it is the *nobility* of faith — provided, of course, it is faith in the One who is entirely worthy of it. That One is Jesus Christ, for *“no one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known”* (John 1: 18).

Christ did not condemn people for a lack of logical skill, but he often condemned them for their lack of faith. There is this to be noticed about the lack of faith, too. Our Lord’s declarations about it suggest that often the lack of faith is morally culpable. It is often not merely a matter of poor logic or befuddled thinking. It is a moral matter, involving moral choices. It can be because one does not *want* to believe. But let us here simply contemplate our Lord’s amazement at the lack of faith, seeing in this the

nobility, the grandeur of faith in Jesus Christ. This faith is a gift from on high which we have been given at our baptism. It is the basis of everything, and it takes us to holiness, to union with Jesus Christ and to life everlasting in the presence of the Holy Trinity.



Thursday of the fourth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 106 (105):47 Save us, O Lord our God! And gather us from the nations, to give thanks to your holy name, and make it our glory to praise you.

Collect Grant us, Lord our God, that we may honour you with all our mind, and love everyone in truth of heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Kings 2:1-4.10-12; Ps. 1 Chronicles 29;
Mark 6:7-13

Calling the Twelve to him, Jesus sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits. These were his instructions: Take nothing for the journey except a staff- no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. Wear sandals but not an extra tunic. Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, shake the dust

off your feet when you leave, as a testimony against them. They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them. (Mark 6:7-13)

The great fight In his presentation of the Gospel, St John takes certain actions or incidents, and with the aid of our Lord's extensive teaching arising from those incidents, builds up a dogmatic presentation on Jesus Christ. Christ speaks of his own divinity, the Trinity of Persons in the one God, the Eucharist being Christ's own flesh and blood, and several other fundamental doctrines of the Christian religion — summed up in the dogma that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God. The other three Gospels have so many evident common elements that they are called the "Synoptics," from the Greek *syn* meaning together, and *optic* meaning seen. To a point, they manifest a common approach, a common method, a common vision. But of course, in fact there are important differences between the three Synoptics too. Nevertheless there is more in common between them than there is

between them and the Gospel of St John. One of the intriguing differences between the three Synoptics and the Gospel of St John is the constant action of Jesus Christ against Satan in his public ministry. Little of this is portrayed in St John, even though he refers to it on occasion. For instance, at the end of his teaching on the holy Eucharist in chapter 6, our Lord refers to one of the Twelve as being a devil. In St John it is especially as he prepares for death that our Lord refers to his combat with Satan (12: 31; 14:30; 16: 11). The Passion and Death of Jesus Christ are described as the casting out of the prince of this world. During the Last Supper, our Lord says that *“the prince of this world is coming — and he has nothing in me.”* These allusions are most important, but they are brief and few. In the Synoptic Gospels, however, from the very outset of the public ministry, the conflict with Satan is immediate, visible and prominent. Each of the three refer to our Lord’s initial encounter with Satan in the wilderness after his baptism. Mark makes a brief mention of it, while Matthew and Luke give the details, so similar as to suggest,

perhaps, a common source. One of the temptations which Satan dangles before Christ is his being allowed to become lord of the world in a temporal sense. He tempts Christ with what so many would hope for from him — being a great temporal Messiah. Now, in this there is an interesting claim by Satan. It is that the kingdoms of the world and their glory are *his to give away*.

In that scene, Christ is taken to a high mountain from which all the kingdoms of the world and their glory are viewed. Perhaps the glory of the Pharaohs, the glory of the Assyrians, the glory of Philip of Macedon, of Alexander his son and his various successors, the glory of Rome and many other passing protagonists on the stage of the history of the world were seen. It is to be noticed that the text says that “*all*” the kingdoms (*pasas tas Basileias*) were seen — and could not Christ have seen, in that vision, each of us? Assuredly so. He lived and died for each of us: St Paul writes that “*Christ loved me, and gave himself up for me.*” But the important thing here is that *Satan claimed dominion*. While we allow for prideful and satanic

bravado, we nevertheless remember that St Paul writes in the Letter to the Romans that *all men are under the power of sin*, and that because of sin *death spread through the whole human race*. Further, in the account of this temptation Christ does not reject Satan's claim. He rejects the temptation and sends Satan packing. Of course, we must not overdo this point, for the Spirit of God was also at work among the peoples and certainly within the life of the chosen people of God. Many exceedingly holy persons distinguished the history of God's chosen people, flowering in Mary the mother of Jesus himself. Still, in each of the Synoptic Gospels, this opening scene of the Temptations sets the pace for the public ministry of our Lord. Time and again there are demons seen in possession, and Christ is shown casting them out right and left, as it were. This feature of the Synoptic presentation of Christ's public ministry shows clearly what is at stake. Christ is intent on gaining the dominion of the world. He is establishing a Kingdom that will never end, and the demons know it. The world is awash with the demonic

element and Christ is set on making all things new. This brings us to a significant detail in our Gospel today: *“Calling the Twelve to him, Jesus sent them out two by two and gave them authority over evil spirits.”* Then having received this power, *“They went out and preached that people should repent. They drove out many demons”* (Mark 6:7-13). Christ is the answer to the power of Satan in the world, and he works in and through his Church.

Let us understand that our life’s work is the following of Jesus Christ. This means the gaining of personal sanctity. It is this which the Church time and again celebrates — and it is the meaning of her highest honour, canonization. A person is canonized for gaining the supreme victory. But holiness involves combat with Satan, who works generally through the temptations of “the world” and “the flesh” — external evil influence and disordered personal desire. Christ established his Church to be his body, his temple, and because of his presence within, that Church is the stronger one against Satan. It is to this that our Gospel passage alludes. Let us take up

sword and buckler, then, and take the fight to everyday life, gaining holiness whatever be the cost — through the grace of Jesus Christ.

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Second reflection:

Living by faith I remember a person who some years back was doing a spiritual retreat, and she complained about one feature of Religious Life. She said, speaking of a life consecrated exclusively to the Person of Christ, “I want to love someone I can see and touch and hear and hold.” What she found as her stumbling block was the necessity of living by faith and not by sight. In the Letter to the Hebrews the inspired author tells us that what we “*have come to is nothing known to the senses*” (Heb 12:18). The author points to the meeting between God and Moses in which so much of what was seen and heard was spectacular. But in our case, the divine realities we are

involved with are relatively unseen. They are God and Jesus and the New Dispensation which has replaced the Old. As our Lord said to Thomas, “*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.*” The practical point, though, is that we must be faithful to the means of living a life of constant and deep faith, as if we can indeed see these unseen realities. It requires fidelity to daily and constant prayer, spiritual reading, some regular study of what God has revealed as the Church teaches it to be, reliable spiritual direction, and a fervent sacramental life.

We have received from the Holy Spirit at our Baptism a heavenly gift, a supernatural virtue, enabling and inclining us to believe what God has revealed. We must act on this and with the love and hope which we also received, exercise the gift. Fruits of sanctity will result.



Friday of the fourth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 106 (105):47 Save us, O Lord our God! And gather us from the nations, to give thanks to your holy name, and make it our glory to praise you.

Collect Grant us, Lord our God, that we may honour you with all our mind, and love everyone in truth of heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Hebrews 13:1-8; Psalm 26; Mark 6:14-29

King Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name had become well known. Some were saying, John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him. Others said, He is Elijah. And still others claimed, He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago. But when Herod heard this, he said, John, the man I beheaded, has been raised from the dead! For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested,

and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. For John had been saying to Herod, It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife. So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him. Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the girl, Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you. And he promised her with an oath, Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom. She went out and said to her mother, What shall I ask for? The head of John the Baptist, she answered. At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter. The king was greatly

distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb. (Mark 6:14-29)

Adverse circumstances I know a devout Catholic man who did very well in life. Raised a non-Catholic, he met a Catholic girl and, becoming interested in the Catholic religion, received instruction in it and became a Catholic at the time of his marriage. He made excellent progress in his professional career, and also made excellent progress in the practice of his Catholic faith, becoming virtually the religious leader of his large family. He was supported in this by his religious wife who also practised her Catholic faith in an exemplary manner. They had their share of reversals and disappointments in life, nevertheless by normal standards he himself did well. Reflecting on his having had good opportunities which he

was able to exploit professionally, he once said to me that he had been in the right place at the right time. He was referring to circumstances which favoured him, and which if they had been absent, his life would not have had the same success. There surely cannot be any doubt that the presence of suitable circumstances is critical for abilities to be given scope and for recognition to come. If Napoleon Bonaparte had lived in another era or country, he may never have been heard of. This is not to reduce ability and achievements to favourable circumstances, but there is no doubt that they have a critical bearing. In the religious world of the first half of nineteenth-century England, on all hands it was recognized that John Henry Newman was outstanding. His accomplishments as an Anglican were great. As a Catholic he experienced a train of frustration and disappointment, such that in a letter of 12 October 1864 he wrote that “I am often led to call my life a history of failure” (*Letters and Diaries*, Vol XXI, p.261). At the end of that same month, the Anglican Dean Stanley visited Newman at Birmingham and wrote of the visit to J. C.

Shairp. His impression of Newman was, he wrote, “not of unhappiness or dissatisfaction, but of a totally wasted life..” (*Life and Correspondence of Arthur Penrhyn Stanley*, II, p.340-2). So that was Stanley’s judgment, not Newman’s. But how mistaken was Stanley, who went simply on appearances! My point in mentioning Newman is to bring out the bearing of circumstances. The Providence of God works amid bad circumstances — and Newman, for instance, has been canonised a saint. Stanley?

Our Gospel passage today (Mark 6:14-29) reminds us of how one can be at the mercy of circumstances. Herod, tetrarch of Galilee, was despicable in his moral life. Christ referred to him as a fox, and refused to speak to him during his Passion. John the Baptist confronted and condemned him for his marriage to Herodias, his brother’s wife — for which he gained her implacable hatred. For his perceived insolence, Herod imprisoned John but his superstition held him back from further action. He feared John for his holiness, and John’s intrepid words held sway over his inner fears. Doubtless he could not bear the thought of

what might happen to him from above if he did John further harm. Thus far, circumstances favoured John, held as he was in his dungeon — and Herod liked listening to him from time to time. His superstitions induced awe before the holy man. So far, John was protected from Herodias who, uninhibited by the subconscious fears of her husband, desired nothing other than John's destruction. While Herod was lecherous and sunk in sin, she may have been, in her soul, a virtual atheist, having no fears of the unseen world. But then in a mere hour or so, the circumstances changed. Herodias' daughter (Salome) dazzled and bewitched Herod and his guests by her dancing. Herod, with liquor in the head, perhaps standing and holding his full cup, shouted that he would give to the girl whatever she asked — he was showing himself as the big man in front of the leading persons of Galilee. Thus the circumstances changed. Thus did Satan, at work in the circumstances, succeed. Thus did John's temporal fortunes suddenly plummet. Thus did he die, and *thus did he gain the crown*. But it was not a mere reversal, it was a sudden

opportunity to bear witness and to gain the victory. All things are in the hand of God and his holy and mighty Providence. It can be impossible to see why God allows certain circumstances to prevail, in which so much apparent harm ensues and darkness descends for long afterwards. The signal lesson and paradigm in this regard is the life, the ministry, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He, the jewel of our race, came to a seemingly inglorious end — within a mere three years at most he was crucified outside the City. To use Dean Stanley's words, what "a totally wasted life"!

But no. By that reversal and that failure the entire human race was redeemed, and this was due to Christ's loving obedience. John the Baptist triumphed amid the bad circumstances due to his holy obedience to the will of God. Newman triumphed amid difficult and disappointing circumstances due to his obedience to the will of God. In this they were following in the footsteps of the Master. There are no circumstances which may not become occasions of advance in holiness and in witness to God and

Christ. In this sense there is no such thing as bad luck or bad circumstances. Nothing, St Paul writes, *neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers — nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Rom 8:38-39).

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Second reflection: (Mark 6:14-29)

The voice of conscience Cardinal Newman once wrote that if we are faithful to the voice of our conscience, that voice will take us progressively towards the truth about God and to personal holiness. He taught that the conscience is the echo of the voice of God, and if we are obedient to its dictates (even if mistaken) the hand of God will guide us on. But following the voice of conscience is no easy matter. King Herod as described in today's Gospel (Mark 6:14-29) had a fitful "conscience" of sorts, and that "conscience" made its voice clear to him. "*Herod was afraid of John, knowing him to be a good and holy man, and gave him his protection*" against Herodias his wife.

When he heard John speak “*he was greatly perplexed, and yet he liked to listen to him.*” If only Herod had submitted to the voice of what conscience he had! But he did not. He listened to other voices. He listened especially to the voice of human respect — what others thought of him. He made his extravagant promise (of half his kingdom) to the daughter of Herodias out of bravado in order to impress his guests and gain their good opinion. Then “*thinking of his oaths and of his guests*” he could not face up to going back on his loud and boastful promise. The voice of what “conscience” he had was snuffed out and he was led into a terrible sin.

The failure to enlighten one’s conscience as to the truth and then to follow it is the greatest source of human failure. In a lesser yet still tragic scale it can happen to us daily — every time we commit a deliberate venial sin. Let us pray for the grace to do our duty for love of God no matter how small and no matter what might be the cost.



Saturday of the fourth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 106 (105):47 Save us, O Lord our God! And gather us from the nations, to give thanks to your holy name, and make it our glory to praise you.

Collect Grant us, Lord our God, that we may honour you with all our mind, and love everyone in truth of heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Kings 3:4-13; Psalm 118; Mark 6:30-34

The apostles gathered round Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest. So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. But many who saw them going knew where, and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When Jesus landed

and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things. (Mark 6: 30-34)

The heart's choice There is a detail in our Gospel passage which we may regard as pointing to something much greater than what it actually portrays. One of the distinguishing features of our Lord's public ministry was its tremendous outreach. Our Lord was engaged in a great effort to reach the whole House of Israel and to draw them into the Kingdom he was to establish, that Kingdom which consisted in union with himself and living with a share in his divine life. Apart from his own efforts, and of course due to them, great numbers flocked to him — at least for a time. We read that Jesus and his disciples “*went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place*” to “*get some rest.*” However, “*many who saw them going knew where, and ran on foot from all the towns and got ahead of them.*” Of course, these crowds hurried ahead for a variety of reasons — doubtlessly some wished to hear our Lord's teaching, while others wanted the more material benefits of various

kinds of healing. But let us take the image of those people running ahead to be with our Lord as he landed as symbolic of those who have a true eagerness for God and Christ. Take an example. Imagine a girl born on a farm in a remote part of the country, raised in a religious family but without any special formal religious schooling. From her earliest years she manifests a true religious spirit. While Sunday Mass is celebrated in her country area once a month, she herself, when old enough, mounts her horse every Sunday and rides quite a distance to get to Mass at the next centre. She truly prays and leads a good life — and all recognize this. She marries, and with her husband moves to the city and there she immediately begins to go to Mass every day. The Rosary is said every day at home, and amid her increasing family her faith continues to grow. The whole family is raised in a religious practice. She lives out her long life known for her intrepid faith, and dies in the Lord. As she is lowered in the grave, all recognize that her love for Jesus Christ is what distinguished her life. She is one of those in the Gospel who would have run

ahead of the Lord to await him as he arrived — but in her case it is for one purpose, to be with him as his disciple.

There are many who would regard a person's religion as little more than a subjective disposition, part of a personal make-up, a feature of one's temperament that could be the product of any one of several causes. It could be, they would think, part of one's hereditary constitution and genes in the way that one's height, or colour of one's eyes, or even intellectual capacity might be. Alternatively, it could be the direct result of one's education, or environment. Religion is considered as instilled into the person from various external influences. That is to say, there is nothing *objective* in the *tenets* of religion. Those tenets are just subjective opinions, feelings, dispositions or whatever. But of course this is just a tremendous assumption, one to which a secular culture is especially prone, but an assumption nevertheless. It is an assumption springing largely from the deeper assumption that God is scarcely an objective fact. In the case of our profoundly religious wife and mother as mentioned above, she herself

was part of a family that was religious, but not all in the family were very religious. One was barely so. The difference cannot be due simply to environment or heredity. If, rather, it is allowed that there is a God, the great God who is Lord of heaven and of earth, then the woman whom we have mentioned was aware of him from her earliest days. In a host of ways, there bore on her mind and heart the objective fact of God's reality and presence. The person of Jesus Christ and his Church were perceived as most real and worthy of belief. She somehow had the necessary foundation, the right starting points, the requisite disposition of mind and heart to perceive these objective facts, and to do so with ease. Of course, by the power of her baptismal grace, she was given the faith that gave her an instinctive inclination to believe, but others too were baptized, and in the event did not believe very much. She did believe, and it was due to, as I said, basic dispositions of mind and heart and it had to do with a choice born of love. In her heart she *chose* to love God and to follow Christ. This is what her heart preferred and chose. Her

preference was not due to other influences, but to herself. She was responsible, as we all are, for her choices.

Let us ask God for the right starting points, the right foundation of mind and heart that will equip us to make our choice for him. We ought pray for grace every day, the grace to have a heart made for God and Christ, the grace to be faithful to him to the very end. Every day let us begin again. We must be such as to want to run ahead to where the Lord might be, as did the people in our Gospel passage today. In our case it should be in order to be with him and to listen to his word — and then to have the love to put that word into practice. In this way we shall be pleasing to God and live as disciples of Jesus Christ.

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Second reflection: (Mark 6:30-34)

Times of holy rest In our Gospel scene today (Mark 6:30-34), the apostles had been busy with the work of the Lord, “*for there were so many coming and going that the apostles had no time even to eat.*” They told our Lord all they had done and taught. Our Lord did not say that they were doing too much. It was good that they had been doing a great deal. Rather, he said that they “*must come away to some lonely place all by yourselves and rest for a while.*” This provides us with a lesson. It is important that we do as much as we can for God in life. We were, in a sense, created to work — provided we transform our work into a worthy offering for God. But we must also rest, provided our rest too is something holy and pleasing to God. It ought be a renewal of our physical, intellectual, and above all our spiritual life, enabling us to begin again at the work God has given us to do and which will bring glory to Him. Just as the apostles worked with our Lord, so they rested with our Lord.

How should we rest? Just as we should work *with* our Lord and *for* him, so we should rest *with* our Lord and *for* him — as did the disciples themselves. We rest with our Lord in gentle prayer and prayerful thought, and by pursuing our physical, cultural and intellectual interests. But whether in work or in wholesome rest our call to holiness must be uppermost in our life. Let us then remember that every day just as God awaits us in our *work*, so he awaits us in our *rest*.



Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 95 (94):6-7 O come, let us worship God and bow low before the God who made us, for he is the Lord our God.

Collect Keep your family safe, O Lord, with unfailing care, that, relying solely on the hope of heavenly grace, they may be defended always by your protection. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 58:7-10; Psalm 111;
1 Corinthians 2:1-5; Matthew 5:13-16

Jesus said, You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand,

and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5: 13-16)

Salt and Light I have heard it stated that a principal feature of the Anglo-Saxon trial system is that it is adversarial, as *opposed* to the European system. Whatever be the truth of this comparison, all in the English-speaking world are aware of the *adversarial* character of courts of justice. Prosecution and defence do not work together to find the truth, rather they are adversaries. What matters is *the win*. The culture is such that if a criminal walks out of court having *won*, then he can ignore the responsibilities he has flouted by his crimes. Perhaps there were no real witnesses, or the witnesses were not convincing, or the law on convictions was too demanding to gain a conviction, or the defence counsel was far superior to the prosecution, or the one breaking the law was just too smart. Now, trial, judgment and conviction in the life of society prompt thoughts in us of each person's

responsibilities. Man enters the world with the power to choose, and with this power comes the responsibility to choose what is good, and avoid what is evil. This fact of responsibility is fundamental in the life of society and every man. After reaching the age of reason, man thenceforth has before him certain responsibilities. He is required to fulfil them, under pain of sanctions — he senses this in his conscience and, to a point, society too makes him aware of it. But what society enforces does not exhaust the matter, for each of us has responsibilities towards God. Each member of Christ's faithful, which is to say every baptised member of the Church, has responsibilities that can be fulfilled or ignored. Our Lord told many parables about those who ignore their responsibilities, and the divine judgment they face. There is no doubt that our Lord, precisely as prophet, spoke more about God's judgment after death than any prophet before him. In the *final* analysis, as far as each of us is concerned there will be two beings that matter: God and myself. That meeting between God and me will involve a judgment and

no one will be able to come between me and my Judge. No defence counsel will be able to outwit judge and jury. Judgment will be brief, manifest, true and ultimate, and with no further recourse. This judgment will turn on how we have fulfilled our God-given responsibilities in life.

There is one responsibility to which our Lord often refers. Each person baptised into Christ has the responsibility of *bearing witness* to him in family, workplace, friends, parish, wherever. It is this to which our Lord refers in today's Gospel (Matthew 5:13-16). We, who are baptized, are to be *the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Salt of the earth!* In those days salt not only gave flavour to food and made it pleasing, but it preserved it from corruption. Right up to the invention of advanced refrigeration, whenever a long sea voyage was being undertaken, the meat would have to be salted for its period at sea. This was critical for sea travel and naval warfare. Salt preserved the meat for a time, otherwise the carcase would quickly corrupt. The Christian who gives his life to Christ and to the pursuit of holiness makes the

world pleasing to God and preserves it from corruption and spiritual death. But as our Lord said, if the salt loses its saltiness, it is useless and has to be thrown out to be trampled underfoot by men. The Christian loses his saltiness by neglecting to cultivate his union with Jesus Christ. Our Lord says that we are *the light of the world*. The Christian is this because he possesses from his baptism the true Light, which is Christ. His light must shine in the sight of men, but all too often it is barely a flicker, indeed in too many cases it has gone out. Even if it is shining still, it should be shining far more. It will not shine brightly if we have not made Christ the great Light of our lives, if he is neglected and disregarded. We must be the true salt of the earth and the light that enlightens those around us in the world. This requires that we must be assiduous in our daily spiritual life, having a plan of spiritual living which is very well advised, well thought out and faithfully adhered to. We ought begin each day prayerfully, offering the day to God and perhaps with the Gospel in our hands. We should do a little spiritual reading each day. We should have a

regimen of prayer, a daily examination of conscience, and we should devoutly receive the Sacraments. We ought sanctify our daily work.

We are all called to personal holiness. We are all born into the world with responsibilities — and our first and greatest responsibility is to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. This is what it means to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We cannot be this if we are not making a persevering effort to seek union with Jesus Christ through daily personal prayer, a holy reception of the Sacraments — especially the Sacraments of the Eucharist and Penance — and by living according to his commandments. At the end, we shall be judged, but not in a human court which can be evaded by adversarial methods. We shall be judged by *God*, and his judgement is final and everlasting. It is assuredly coming. Let us never imagine we can evade it.



Monday of the fifth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 95 (94):6-7 O come, let us worship God and bow low before the God who made us, for he is the Lord our God.

Collect Keep your family safe, O Lord, with unfailing care, that, relying solely on the hope of heavenly grace, they may be defended always by your protection. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Kings 8:1-7.9-13; Psalm 131;

Mark 6:53-56

When Jesus and his disciples had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there. As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognised Jesus. They ran throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went — into villages, towns or countryside — they placed the sick

in the market places. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched him were healed. (Mark 6:53-56)

God's power There are various views on the meaning of the traditional religion of the Australian Aborigines, and it is a brave man who presumes to pronounce firmly on it. It is manifest, though, that the *Dreaming* (as it is commonly called) is fundamental. It is largely a religion of *the Dreaming*. That is to say, it involves an evocation of the *Dreamtime* and, through song and ritual, a process of *making it present*. The Dreamtime is the original coming-to-be of the world of the tribe or clan with its pulsating life and fertility, imparting to that world all that sustains life and happiness. To evoke the Dreamtime is to make present once again something of that great original impulse, and to ensure the active presence of what the family, the clan, the tribe or the people need for life and happiness. It renews life, and, by drawing on the power of the Dreaming, vulnerable man is sustained and enabled to flourish. It is plain that elements of this

religious approach can be harmonized with a sacramental religion, which is what, for instance, the *Catholic* religion is. One thing about it is also obvious, and that is the effort of man — in this case the traditional Australian Aborigine — to gain access to a greater and higher Power. Man needs contact with real power that will meet the needs of his weakness and his liability to destruction. Across the spectrum of primal religions we see this seeking to befriend and win over the unseen powers that can control the adverse forces of the world. There are other aspects of this in many traditional religions, such as the sense of guilt. In many cases the adverse conditions and threats which the religion in question seeks to remedy are perceived as punishments for offences against the deities. Be all this as it may, the general point I wish to make here is that the religions of man manifest his profound *need for help from above* — he needs the help, the constant help, of higher and greater powers. He needs access to a Power which is friendly to him. His religion is very much an expression of this — while being other things too. How great is the

excitement when this kindly Power is discovered to be present among men!

God revealed himself as the Power who befriends and aids the needy and vulnerable. God entered the life of Moses and directed him to lead his people out of the land of slavery to the Promised Land. We read (in Exodus 2) that Moses was tending the flock of Jethro when he saw the bush which, though on fire, was not consumed. There he heard the voice of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who said that *“I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint... Therefore I have come down to rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians and lead them out of that land into a good and spacious land...”* God presents himself as all-powerful and friendly to his people. This is exactly what man needs, and it is what he is ever seeking. It is exactly what the people believed they had found in Jesus of Nazareth in our Gospel today. He was friendly, he loved them, and he was full of power in their regard. We read that *“As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognised Jesus. They ran*

throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was.” There was nothing menacing about Jesus Christ — at least to those who recognized their need. People ran to him. They did not ask whether he was tired, or needed some peace and quiet with his disciples. They did not consult for a minute about his convenience. They did not ask whether they were in such a state as to be pleasing to him. They certainly did not reflect on whether he would be angry or irritated with them — and the anger of the gods was usually a significant issue in the religions of man. They simply ran to Jesus Christ with their needs. He had the fullness of power, he was holy, and they knew he was very friendly, kind, compassionate. God was present in him somehow, and so they ran to him. Therefore, *“wherever he went — into villages, towns or countryside — they placed the sick in the market places. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched him were healed”* (Mark 6:53-56). The one, almighty God was accessible to

them through this man Jesus Christ. They had yet to learn that he himself was this one, almighty God become man.

The first thing we generally think of when we think of God is his *power*. The God of historical revelation has revealed himself to be infinite in his power. Indeed, this may be a unique feature of Revealed Religion. I am not sure that there is any other religion which teaches that the power of its deity is *infinite*. This one God had the power even to become a vulnerable man. He had the power to take away the sin of the world, and he had the power to do it by atoning for it as a victim for our sake. God can do all things. Most of all he can and wants to redeem and sanctify us so that we can be with him for ever in heaven. He can do this. Let us rely on the power and grace of God, then, and see in Jesus Christ our all. As St Paul writes, this is the mystery now revealed, “*Christ in you — your hope of glory.*”

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Second reflection:

Our work One of the most common mistakes is to think that our work is not of much intrinsic value, and to think that the work of others is not of much value either. For example, we might tend to think that the only value our work has is that of meeting mere necessities or of delivering into our hands a pay packet. Were it not for certain necessities and for the pay packet, we may not work much at all. But that is not how God himself is revealed to be acting. From the very first pages of the Bible, God is revealed to us to be *at work* creating and sustaining this world. So to *be at work*, provided it is work in accordance with God's will, makes us *similar to God*. *God* works, so then should *we*. So intent was the inspired compiler of the first chapter of Genesis on giving us *this* picture of God, that he shows God engaged in a *working week*, finishing with a day of rest. If we work well — and God worked well, for everything he made he saw to be good — if we work well each day and each week, and duly observe our Sabbath rest as God commands in the third commandment,

then we shall be very like God. We should aspire to work well all our lives and to make our work a means whereby we grow in the likeness of our heavenly Father.

We should make our work a means of sanctification. Our Lord said, when attacked for curing on the Sabbath, that *“My Father is working, and so I keep on working.”* The Gospel is full of the portrayal of our Lord busy at his work. We should strive to be like him, busy at our God-given daily work, making it something holy.



Tuesday of the fifth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 95 (94):6-7 O come, let us worship God and bow low before the God who made us, for he is the Lord our God.

Collect Keep your family safe, O Lord, with unfailing care, that, relying solely on the hope of heavenly grace, they may be defended always by your protection. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Kings 8:22-23.27-30; Psalm 83;
Mark 7:1-13

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered round Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were unclean, that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they

come from the market place they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.) So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands? He replied, Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: 'These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men. And he said to them: You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, 'Honour your father and your mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban' (that is, a gift devoted to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. Thus you nullify the

word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that. (Mark 7: 1-13)

God's will Our Gospel passage today presents yet another instance of the clash between Jesus Christ and the scribes and Pharisees. The scribes and Pharisees require of him an explanation of why his disciples do not conform to the received rules of washing. They saw “*some of his disciples eating food with hands that were unclean, that is, unwashed.*” St Mark gives his reader the context of this. “*The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the market place they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.*” Of course, practices such as these, though excessive, were not wrong in themselves, and could claim a certain likeness with the prescriptions of purity and cleanliness in the Scriptures such as those in the book of Leviticus. Further, they could have been a reminder of the requirement of inner purity of heart from the filth of sin.

But, as we read from our Lord's instant accusation, as observed by many of the *Pharisees* these practices *substituted* for inner purity, and masked a false disposition of the heart. Our Lord said his accusers were hypocrites, giving the impression by such man-made practices that they were one thing, whereas in reality they were entirely different. In their hypocrisy they substituted their own religious customs for what God required of them, thus deceiving their own consciences and those of others. For example, by declaring something to be a gift to God (that is, "Corban"), they erased from consciences the divine command to care for parents. "And," our Lord said, "*you do many things like that*" (Mark 7: 1-13). Let us ponder on those final words, because in one way or another they can apply to us. In "*many things*" we can substitute what is more useful, convenient, or advantageous for what God has commanded in Revelation or in the natural law. We can cloak this sleight-of-hand substitution by regarding what is but a preference as "*our duty*." We rationalize away the

doing of God's will, and create in ourselves a false conscience, which is no conscience at all.

In a brief address which Pope Benedict XVI once gave to the directors and officers of the Police Headquarters in Rome (January 21, 2011), he made mention of the objective demands of the conscience and how they can be reduced to mere subjective preferences. The Pope referred to the breakdown of a moral consensus. If there is to be co-existence in society, the institutions and laws which make this possible must be supported. But law involves ethical principles, and if there is a lack of consensus on these principles, then the forces mobilized to defend society will fail. Now modern thought places great stress on the subjective dimension of existence. The "subject" is given a special importance, and while this has a strength, it carries a certain risk in relation to the theory of the conscience of man. It has come to be thought, as Benedict said, that *"there are no objective references in determining what has value and what is true; rather, each possesses his own truth and his own morals."* On the

contrary, “*the true meaning of ‘conscience’ is man’s capacity to recognize truth and, even more so, the possibility he has to hear its call, to seek it and to find it.*” So in a sense we have a more serious situation than that which our Lord was criticizing in the scribes and Pharisees. We are liable to think that “my conscience,” which is simply what I happen to think, constitutes my duty, and takes precedence over objective moral obligation. I take it for granted that if *I think* something is right, then by that *mere fact it is objectively* right. In this way I can not only substitute what is more convenient for objective moral obligation, and explain it away to myself as being what is morally right. I can also consider that there is no objective moral obligation binding me anyway. I make up my own mind, and no more ultimate word need be said about the matter. That is to say, while in every age and place there has been the perennial temptation to substitute personal aggrandizement and convenience for what is objectively right in the moral order and in religion, in our modern age we have a view of the conscience to justify this to

ourselves. The conscience is not deemed to be man's capacity to recognize *objective truth*, to hear its call and to seek it. Rather it is just what *I think and decide*, and nothing more.

The point here is that we must so tune and develop our consciences that they remain sensitive to the objective law and will of God, as it is expressed in the natural law and in what God has revealed. Let the example of the scribes and Pharisees whom our Lord criticized be a warning to us. For one reason or another, consciously or unconsciously, we can avoid doing the will of God and substitute for it an action suited to our own convenience or will. This involves an objective offence against God and, to a greater or lesser extent, a rejection of his position as God. As our Lord said on one occasion — *whoever does the will of God, he is my mother, brother, and sister*.

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Second reflection:

We are God's children The first chapter of Genesis shows God to be the Creator of all that exists. Everything that he made is good. So, bearing the Creator's imprint, the world ought constantly remind us of the reality and goodness of God. Now, one teaching of that inspired chapter is that the crown of our world is *man*. While the things God has made are "*good*," man, made in his own image, is "*very good*." But man, created "*very good*" in his nature, has been profoundly spoilt and wounded. By our baptism we are placed in Christ and filled with the holiness of God, sharing his own divine life. A higher calling comes into being, which is to resist the propensity to sin and to live in this divine life. By his baptism man is called to be a saint.

Let us be grateful for the gift of human life and the gift of divine life, making us God's children. Let us live what we are, recognising our dignity, and live it to the full.



Wednesday of the fifth week in Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: 1 Kings 10:1-10; Psalm 36; Mark 7:14-23

Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean'. After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. Are you so dull? he asked. Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from

the outside can make him 'unclean'? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then passes on. (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.) He went on: What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean'. For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean'. (Mark 7:14-23)

Out of the heart Our scene is Palestine, and it is a little over two thousand years ago. A child is born to a Jewish family in Galilee, a family observant of the Revealed Law of God. His father is John. The child is given the name Simeon, or Simon. His brother is Andrew. They grow in their childhood, into adolescence, and then into being vigorous and devout young men. They absorb the great hope of Israel for the coming Messiah and make it their own. Their business is with fishing on the Lake of Galilee, and they are competent and successful in their work. Simon marries, but perhaps — for we do not know

for certain one way or the other — his young wife dies childless. That he married is clear because we read of his mother-in-law, but we read no mention at all of his wife in the house. Simon is a good man as is his brother Andrew, and news comes to Galilee that there is a prophet in Judea, John. Numbers are going to him to be baptized in the river Jordan, as a grace-filled expression of repentance. There is talk of the coming of God in some way, indeed of the Messiah. We know the grand sequel. It was there that Simon and his brother Andrew — Andrew first, and then Simon — met the Messiah and became his friends and disciples. They are called to be of the Twelve, with Simon being, and being called, the Rock. Their goodness flowers, and despite their faults they go on to holiness of life, spending their lives in the greatest cause of all — spreading Christ's Church and bringing others into union with Jesus the Messiah and Son of God. They end their days as martyrs for the name of Jesus, and now are with Christ the Lord in heaven. Out of their hearts could have come a trail of mediocrity. But with the aid of the grace of God and

their own good resolution, from their obscure and ordinary beginnings came untold good. At the same time all those years, while they were growing up, so was another good young man, Judas Iscariot. Of course, he too has his faults. He meets Jesus and so great is his promise and so special the choice of God that he is called not only to be a disciple, but one of the very Twelve. But how sad and tragic is the sequel! From the heart of Judas came betrayal, tragedy, despair, and a total moral catastrophe. From the heart of each, on the one hand Judas and on the other Simon, came very different things. It is the drama of every soul.

A child is born, and the birth gives great joy to his parents. He is a healthy baby, and his entry into the course of life floods the hearts of his parents with happiness. He is taken to the Church and is baptized into Christ, and the life of God floods the soul of the infant. What awesome prospects lie ahead! From his heart, renewed wonderfully by grace but wounded by original sin and personal sin, can come very opposite things. He could be a saint — and numbers upon numbers become saints, some known and

recognized by decree of the Church, many more known only to God in heaven. They are the heroes of human history, and out of their hearts have come untold good. Others, though — oh, how sad is their course! Adolf Hitler was a baptized and confirmed a Catholic. That is to say, he had been given the grace of the Holy Spirit, and the spiritual means of growing in holiness, but how colossal was the moral tragedy of his life! Out of his heart flowed not good, but incalculable harm. Such is the drama of the human being. A man's heart can become very good, or it can become very bad. It can grow in goodness, it can be but mediocre, or it can descend into moral corruption. In our Gospel today (Mark 7:14-23), our Lord sets aside all thought that it is basically what enters a man from outside that *“makes him unclean.”* That is to say, man is responsible for himself, for it is from him, from his own heart that the true evil of the world flows. So it was in the beginning. Out of his heart, made good by God at its creation, came evil, and this because of his own personal decision to sin. Thus sin entered the world and with sin

came death, and death has spread to the whole human race. This is the fallen condition into which every man is born, and it is then compounded by his own decision to sin. As our Lord said, *“What comes out of a man is what makes him ‘unclean’. For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean’”* (Mark 7:14-23).

We must make a choice every day. Because of the work of Christ and our own baptism which brings that work to our souls, we have the spiritual wherewithal to combat our own fallen hearts and to make it possible for grace to change them. Out of our hearts can come good, or evil. Let us make sure that our hearts are transformed into the likeness of Christ, so that what poured out of his heart for the benefit of mankind will be replicated in small measure in us. Let us so strive as to become like Christ.



Thursday of the fifth week in Ordinary Time

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Collect Keep your family safe, O Lord, with unfailing care, that, relying solely on the hope of heavenly grace, they may be defended always by your protection. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Kings 11:4-13; Ps. 105; Mark 7:24-30

Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came and fell at his feet. The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter. First

let the children eat all they want, he told her, for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs. Yes, Lord, she replied, but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs. Then he told her, For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter. She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. (Mark 7: 24-30)

The Gospels

It is useful comparing the different Gospel accounts of the same scene in our Lord's ministry, for there are differences. Each in its own way helps us know the Lord. Our Gospel passage today from Mark is a case in point. Both Mark (Mark 7: 24-30) and Matthew (15: 21-28) situate the event described today immediately after our Lord's confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem over eating with unwashed hands. Following this, Christ teaches that it is the heart of a man that can make him unclean, not the food he eats. Then we read in Mark that "*Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre.*" Matthew adds Sidon, telling us that "*he arose and departed from there for the district of Tyre*

and Sidon.” This is no real difference, because Mark tells us that after the event our Lord departed again “from the district of Tyre, and came by way of Sidon to the Sea of Galilee.” Matthew (having mentioned both Tyre and Sidon), is content to tell us that our Lord *“left that country and passed along the sea of Galilee.”* Mark gives further detail about the visit to Tyre. He writes that *“he entered a house, and did not want anyone to know it,”* whereas Matthew mentions nothing of the house nor of the secrecy. All he tells us is that Jesus went to the region. The details, given in Mark and missing in Matthew, make the scene live. They suggest that our Lord, truly human as he was — though divine too — wanted rest, time with his heavenly Father, and perhaps prime time with the Twelve for their instruction. Mark tells us that despite our Lord’s efforts, his presence became known — indeed, the Canaanite woman was on to him immediately. This suggests the urgency of her case and her desperation, together with our Lord’s own fame. He was known more widely than, humanly speaking, he expected. He expected that he

would arrive and spend time there incognito, but no. Immediately his presence was detected, and the desperate pagan woman lost not a second of time. With that, our Lord's precious retreat in the house of that neighbourhood was at an end. At least in these first sentences, Mark's details illustrate the very human circumstances involved. The Incarnation was real. The Son of God did not escape the coincidences and unexpected exigencies of real life. God though he was, he was truly man enmeshed in our human situation.

But we then notice a certain emphasis in Matthew's account of what our Lord said that is missing in Mark. Mark portrays the Syro-phoenician woman simply importuning our Lord with her pressing need. Our Lord's reply to her refers to the bread of "*the children*" and that it should not be cast to "*the dogs*" — clearly a reference on the one hand to the children of Israel, and on the other to the Gentiles. This too is included in Matthew's account. But in Matthew's account our Lord tells his own disciples (before speaking to the pagan woman) that his mission "*is*

only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel.” Matthew’s Gospel would seem to have been written with the Hebrews especially in mind — and Jesus was God’s gift for them. They are privileged in God’s sight, for the Saviour of the world was sent in a special way to them. That is one reason why the Christian of our day would look somewhat askance at the suggestion, heard in recent years, that no effort ought be made to bring the Jewish people to an encounter with the person of Jesus and to Christian discipleship. A reading of Matthew’s Gospel would suggest that St Matthew would not at all agree with this. Further, in Matthew the Canaanite woman comes to our Lord addressing him as “*Lord, Son of David.*” This is missing in Mark. So Matthew has the *pagan* woman recognizing our Lord’s exalted status (“Lord”) as well as his most significant lineage (“Son of David”). Even if the woman did not appreciate the transcendent sense of the terms she used, Matthew is drawing out yet again the great theme of his Gospel that Jesus is the fulfilment of all the prophecies and expectations of the Scriptures. He is the

Messiah of God's chosen people, the promised Son of David. But all of this having been said, both accounts of the interchange between Christ and the woman continue and end with the same facts. Our Lord's studied reserve towards her, her immediate parry and response, and our Lord's admiring acknowledgment of her faith and his granting of the miracle, are common to both accounts. Even so, the accounts *end* with differences. In St Mark, our Lord tells her that "*the devil has gone out of your daughter,*" and when she returns to her house she finds the devil gone. In Matthew our Lord simply says, "*let your will be granted. And from that moment her daughter was cured.*"

Each account of the Gospel has so much that can nourish our knowledge of and love for Jesus Christ. Let us read the Gospels daily and prayerfully, asking the Holy Spirit for light and love to advance in the Christian life. At its heart the Christian religion consists in a personal friendship with Jesus Christ, and a sharing in his life by grace. Let us make this our daily path, using the

Scriptures, and most especially the Gospels, to help us on our way as we follow in the footsteps of Jesus our Saviour.



Friday of the fifth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 95 (94):6-7 O come, let us worship God and bow low before the God who made us, for he is the Lord our God.

Collect Keep your family safe, O Lord, with unfailing care, that, relying solely on the hope of heavenly grace, they may be defended always by your protection. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Kings 11:29-32;12:19; Psalm 80;
Mark 7:31-37

Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged him to place his hand on the man. After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears.

Then he spat and touched the man's tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, Ephphatha! (which means, Be opened!). At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly. Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. People were overwhelmed with amazement. He has done everything well, they said. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak. (Mark 7:31-37)

The Decapolis

Let us notice that, following on the event described in the preceding passage (i.e., the deliverance of the Syro-phoenician woman's daughter from the demon), our Lord continues his sojourn in pagan territory. He had retired to the pagan district of Tyre, wishing his whereabouts to be unknown, but it was not to be. Immediately the pagan woman extracted from him a striking exorcism. At a word and at a distance, he cured her daughter of the possession. Presumably word was out, and perhaps for this reason our Lord left that neighbourhood, travelling through Sidon and "*down to the*

Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis.” Like Tyre, the Decapolis was a pagan area. He may still have been looking for time away from all the crowds of Galilee and Judea. However, we ought remember that Mark was, as Simon Peter’s later assistant in Rome, writing also for a Gentile audience. So he may also have been intending to show instances in our Lord’s life of his contact with the Gentiles and of his brief ministry among them. By his entry into a pagan territory such as the Decapolis (the Ten Towns), our Lord may also have been interested in introducing the Twelve to a taste of their future mission. While his own specific mission was to the lost sheep of the House of Israel, they themselves would be sent to the whole world to make disciples of all the nations. In Matthew’s account, after the encounter with the Syro-phoenician woman at Tyre, our Lord departs and goes to the Sea of Galilee where he ascends a mountain and the people come to him. Matthew makes no mention here of the visit to the pagan territory of the Decapolis. It may not have fitted into his purpose, but it must have been part of

Mark's. Indeed, Mark's account of this visit to the Decapolis is not just a passing incidental. As a matter of fact, his account of the visit to the Decapolis is nearly as long as that of the visit to Tyre, and it is just as vivid in detail. Interestingly, we notice that as soon as Jesus arrived (7:31-32), the inhabitants had work for him.

That is to say, as soon as our Lord arrived at the Decapolis (7:31), he must have been recognized, just as he had been in Tyre. Now, in Mark's Gospel this is not the first time that our Lord had visited the Decapolis. Two chapters earlier (Mark 5:1-20), at the end of extensive teaching and work, our Lord decides to go "*to the other side*" with his disciples — to the Decapolis region. It was an excursion for a little rest and recreation, and perhaps further instruction. At the end of an eventful passage during which our Lord calms the storm at a word, they arrive in "*the country of the Gerasenes.*" It was one of the Ten Towns (the Decapolis), the nearest to Galilee across the Lake. Arriving, there then follows our Lord's dramatic encounter with the man hopelessly possessed by several

demons. At a word our Lord ordered the demons out, and with his (merciful) leave, they entered the pigs — and forthwith the pigs perished in the Lake. The upshot was that the inhabitants of the town came out and, filled with superstitious perplexity, asked our Lord to leave. The restored man, however, pressed to be allowed to remain with him. No, our Lord replied — you are to stay here and “*go home and tell them all the Lord has done for you in his mercy.*” Obediently, this is just what the man did — he “*began to proclaim in the Decapolis*” — and not just in the Gerasene area — “*the things that Jesus did for him*” (Mark 5: 20). So this man made Jesus known. In his own limited way, he became a proclaimer of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This alone may account for the fact that when our Lord arrived in the Decapolis area again, following on his visit to Tyre, he was immediately presented with the deaf-mute of our Gospel today. “*There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged him to place his hand on the man*” (Mark 7:31-37). Still, our Lord did not want this known and so he

took the man aside and healed him, afterwards ordering his friends to keep the matter quiet. In the case of this particular healing, our Lord does it in a way that suggests ceremony and effort. Perhaps he was also intending to introduce his disciples, by their witnessing of this event, to the sacramental character of their future ministry.

Our Gospel event to day presents our Lord's brief involvement in the pagan region of the Decapolis. Others from the Decapolis were among the crowds following and hearing our Lord, we read in St Matthew (4: 25). It reminds us that, as the (schismatic and heretical) Samaritans of St John's Gospel said (4: 42), *Jesus is the Saviour of the world*. Let us appreciate that anew. He is *the only way to the Father. To see him is to see the Father. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life*. Let us resolve to bring Jesus Christ to those around us in our everyday life, and by our lives to be a true witness to his Person.



Saturday of the fifth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 95 (94):6-7 O come, let us worship God and bow low before the God who made us, for he is the Lord our God.

Collect Keep your family safe, O Lord, with unfailing care, that, relying solely on the hope of heavenly grace, they may be defended always by your protection. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Kings 12:26-32;13:33-34; Psalm 105;
Mark 8:1-10

During those days another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said, I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance. His

disciples answered, But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them? How many loaves do you have? Jesus asked. Seven, they replied. He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people, and they did so. They had a few small fish as well; he gave thanks for them also and told the disciples to distribute them. The people ate and were satisfied. Afterwards the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. About four thousand men were present. And having sent them away, he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the region of Dalmanutha. (Mark 8:1-10)

Seven loves, seven baskets Anyone familiar with the principal elements of the Old Testament, especially the rescue by God of his people from slavery and his bringing them into the Promised Land, might see certain allusions in our Gospel event today. Interestingly, the passage begins with the vague phrase, “*during those days.*” Perhaps there is there a slight allusion to the days long past when great

things happened. We can imagine the children of Israel reminiscing of the wonderful things of the past, things that happened “*during those days.*” Here, there is a great crowd with our Lord, and we learn later that it is in the “*desert*” or wilderness. So, perhaps we are *reminded* of the things that happened “*during those days*” when the children of Israel were in the desert, the wilderness, following the lead of Moses the servant of God. We read in Exodus 16 that “*the whole community of Israel came into the desert of Sin*” many weeks after their departure from Egypt. “*Here in the desert the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron.*” They accused Moses of leading them to their deaths by famine. There is no complaint against Jesus by the multitude before him, but he anticipates their need. “*If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance.*” Mark seems to be looking on Jesus as the new Moses who is about to feed the people with manna from heaven. We know the sequel: “*When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples*

to set before the people, and they did so. They had a few small fish as well; he gave thanks for them also and told the disciples to distribute them.” From the seven loaves (and a few fish), seven baskets of left-overs were gathered up. In the desert, it had been manna and quail. Here it was bread and fish. Let us notice another point. In the prior case narrated by Mark of our Lord feeding the multitude (Mark 6: 35-44) there were five loaves and two fish, and twelve baskets full of scraps were gathered up. I have always been intrigued at these differences in the number of loaves and baskets used in each event.

In the case of the twelve baskets of scraps in the earlier miracle of Chapter 6, we immediately think of the Twelve who did the distribution and who gathered up the scraps. There were twelve baskets, one for each Apostle. One wonders whether there is a point in these details — that the Church of the Twelve, commissioned and led by Jesus Christ, is that to which the *twelve tribes of Israel* is being called as to their home and their true nourishment. But in the next miracle of the feeding of the multitudes

reported by Mark, there are *seven* loaves used and *seven* baskets that were gathered up, and the crowd is of a different size. Perhaps the crowd in this case symbolized a different people of the future — the *Gentile* people. We also remember how, in the Book of Deuteronomy (7 :1), Moses, having summoned the people to him, says to them that the Lord God will bring them into the promised land — a land of “*seven* nations more numerous and powerful than you.” The *seven* nations are named, and they will be overcome. Here in our Gospel passage today (Mark 8:1-10), Christ, possibly as a new Moses, feeds the multitude with *seven* loaves and gathers up *seven* baskets of scraps left over. These facts as to the food and the baskets may also allude to the *Gentile* nations who would be fed by Jesus Christ as members of his new people. This is conjectural, but at least the factual details can remind us of certain Scriptural allusions. Further, it is not immediately clear where exactly this event in Mark took place. It immediately follows — without an explicit naming of the location — our Lord’s healing of the deaf-mute in the

“district of the Decapolis.” On that occasion our Lord took the deaf-mute away *“from the crowd”* and dealt with him privately. So there was a “crowd” there. That healing event over, Mark immediately takes us to our scene today, which occurred *“during those days,”* with *“the multitude being great”* (8: 1). Did it occur also in the *pagan Decapolis*? The parallel account in Matthew (15: 29-39) suggests not, but Mark does not clarify it for us in his own account. My point is that we are at least reminded of the *future mission* of the Church to the *Gentile nations*. At the time of his writing of the Gospel, Mark was assistant to Simon Peter in Rome, the heart of the pagan Empire.

Let us think of the compassion of Jesus Christ for the whole world. His own particular mission was to the chosen people of Israel, but it was the beginning of his mission to the world as head of his Church. We ourselves are being continually fed by his divine nourishment, which is none other than his very self, coming to us in his word, in the holy Eucharist, and in the ministry and life of his body the Church. Let us hear his call, then, to be his

friends and disciples, keeping ever close to him and living faithfully according to his teaching. Our calling is to become like him, sharing in his life, and preparing for life eternal in his presence.



Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 31 (30):3-4 Be my protector, O God, a mighty stronghold to save me. For you are my rock, my stronghold! Lead me, guide me, for the sake of your name.

Collect O God, who teach us that you abide in hearts that are just and true, grant that we may be so fashioned by your grace as to become a dwelling pleasing to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ecclesiasticus 15: 15-20; Psalm 118;
1 Corinthians 2:6-10; Matthew 5:17-37

Jesus said, Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until

everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practises and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell. Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand

you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny. You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife — marital unfaithfulness is a separate case — causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery. Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is

God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes', and your 'No', 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.
(Matthew 5:17-37)

The Law of the Gospel Our passage today consists of twenty verses from the Sermon on the Mount. This great Sermon was Matthew's compilation of Christ's teaching which he gave at the start of the public ministry. It is the Law of the Gospel, promulgated by Jesus Christ on the Mount, reminiscent of the promulgation of the Law of God on Mount Sinai over a thousand years before. As our Lord explains, his Law fulfils the Law of Moses and the Prophets. Jeremiah had prophesied that God would establish a New Covenant with the house of Israel. *"I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people"* (Jer 31: 31-34). St Augustine wrote that the Sermon on the Mount expresses *"the perfect way of the*

Christian life (and) all the precepts needed to shape one's life" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.1966). It sets forth a life that reflects that of Jesus Christ, fulfilling, refining, surpassing and leading the Old Law to perfection. The gift of the Holy Spirit is at the heart of the way described in our Gospel today (Matthew 5: 17-37), and it is the Holy Spirit who can take the Christian beyond normal morality to the exceptional sanctity described in the Sermon on the Mount. It shows in greater detail what it means to imitate Jesus Christ in everyday life. Now, what is especially noteworthy and suggestive about the Sermon on the Mount is the general picture of *sanctity* that it provides — and history is not short of instances of this superior Christian sanctity in the most unlikely places. Let me nominate one unlikely place where sanctity is not usually expected: *in the halls of secular power*. We do not expect to see sanctity in those wielding power in the top echelons of civil society. I am thinking of monarchs, military generals, or those close to them in the work of government. We expect to see there men or women of

very mixed motives and less than excellent actions. We could almost regard such a class of persons as a test case of the possibility of the Holy Spirit empowering man to live according to the Law of Christ, and in a way surpassing the Old. There have been saints who were civil rulers. One such was King Louis IX of France (1214 — 1270), canonized 27 years after his death by Pope Boniface VIII, and the only canonized king of France.

Consider another example of shining sanctity in the midst of matters military and political. I refer to Joan of Arc (1412–1431). She was called by God to a brief career as a military general, a fighting warrior, a person of the sword, a leader attacking strongholds and restoring a temporal kingship. She was born into a prosperous peasant family, and her life was lived in the context of the Hundred Years War between France and England. She had a notable place in the decline of the English campaign. At the age of thirteen, through the ‘voice’ of St. Michael the Archangel, Joan felt herself called by the Lord to intensify her Christian life and to act personally to free her people.

She made a vow of virginity and redoubled her prayers, participating in sacramental life with renewed energy. She, a young French peasant girl, had singular compassion and commitment in the face of her people's suffering, and this was made even more intense through her mystical relationship with God. God intervened in her life, calling her to union with him but with this rather original feature. She had from God a *political and military* mission — and in a sense she could be looked on as an inspiration for those in these spheres of life. Her activities began in early 1429 when she managed to meet with the French Dauphin, the future King Charles VII. He had her examined by theologians of the University of Poitiers who found her to be a good Christian. On 22 March of that year Joan dictated a letter to the King of England and his men, who were laying siege to the city of Orleans. She wanted peace between the two Christian peoples, but the offer was rejected. So she fought for the liberation of the city. A culminating moment of her work came in July 1429 when King Charles was crowned in Reims. The following year

she fell into the hands of her enemies at Compiègne and was taken to the city of Rouen. There, after a long trial, she was condemned to death on 30 May 1431. She died burning at the stake not yet twenty years of age, holding the crucifix and calling on the name of Jesus. She was a magnificent example of one who loved and served Christ in a political and military setting. She ended her short life in the most horrible fashion, but resolutely in the arms of Jesus Christ and a heroic Christian warrior to the end. Exonerated by the Pope twenty-five years after her execution, the Maid of Orléans was canonized by a later Pope nearly half a millennium later in 1920.

In our Gospel today (Matthew 5: 17-37), our Lord says that he had come to fulfil the Law and the Prophets. The *sanctity* he offers as our Redeemer is one that surpasses ordinary morality. He has given to us the Gift that makes this possible, the Gift that is the Holy Spirit. But it means that we must work at our union with Jesus Christ, making him and his love the soul of all that we do, no matter what our calling in life may be. It has been said

that the present age is the age of the laity. This means especially the call on the laity to seek personal sanctity and to bring Jesus Christ and his love to every secular setting, even the most unlikely. Louis of France and Joan of Arc may provide us with example and inspiration in this. Let us follow their example in our modern day, a day that is so very secular.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.1965 - 1974 (The New Law)



Monday of the sixth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 31 (30):3-4 Be my protector, O God, a mighty stronghold to save me. For you are my rock, my stronghold! Lead me, guide me, for the sake of your name.

Collect O God, who teach us that you abide in hearts that are just and true, grant that we may be so fashioned by your grace as to become a dwelling pleasing to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: James 1: 1-11; Psalm 118; Mark 8:11-13

The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test him, they asked him for a sign from heaven. He sighed deeply and said, Why does this generation ask for a miraculous sign? I tell you the truth, no sign will be given to it. Then he left them, got back into the boat and crossed to the other side. (Mark 8:11-13)

Signs My impression is that outside the population of believers who truly practise their religion, miracles are generally viewed with disinterest and scepticism. Of course, the Catholic Church views claims of miracles with some scepticism too. The normal assumption is that things happen according to the laws of Nature, that Nature of which God is the Author — until in some particular case the contrary is shown to be morally certain. St John Henry Newman once claimed in a sermon in 1826 that it was Revelation's insistence on one infinite Creator which was a significant stimulus to the scientific mentality. Prior to the dogma of one Creator of all, man tended to consider the governance of the world as being in the hands of a host of deities, each with a different stake in the world's activity. Neptune was involved with the sea, Jove with war, and so forth. At times, too, the gods were in conflict. That is to say, the world was not governed according to consistent laws coming from the one Creator, but according to the different whims and aims of this or that deity. So the world's functioning could not be studied systematically.

When scientific and empirical investigation did gather momentum, the notion of consistent physical laws embedded in the course and constitution of the world was supported by the acceptance of a single, supreme Creator and Governor. So, though God might later be disregarded and abandoned, monotheism was taken to have done a good work in favouring the assumption of a consistent universe that could be studied scientifically. In fact, we have gone beyond this to assume that miracles are like magician's tricks: if only we knew what is happening out of sight we could explain everything that we see being done. It is also assumed that religion rests on claims of miracles, whereas in reality it is only part of the broad basis of religion. The long and the short of it is that there is, among very many, a modern *prejudice against* claims of miracles. When the Church accepts the fact of a miracle as a divine stamp of approval for its conclusion that an individual practised heroic Christian virtue, that ecclesiastical decision tends to be dismissed as slightly

ridiculous and certainly over-credulous. The miracle is a non-event.

The modern prejudice against claims of miracles is in effect a statement that they are *so* unlikely as not to warrant acceptance. They lack *all* antecedent probability, so they cannot be accepted seriously. This *prior assumption* against their probability can be so great as to leave a person absolutely cold in the face of excellent evidence for the miracle in question. It reminds us that the acceptance of something beyond empirical experience is not just a matter of rational evidence, nor even that “seeing is believing.” Of critical importance are fundamental attitudes and prior assumptions in the face of reality. Everything hinges on one’s starting points, where one is coming from, what one’s fundamental assumptions and beliefs are — and this brings us to our Gospel today (Mark 8:11-13). We read that “*The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test him, they asked him for a sign from heaven.*” These people were not instances of modern secular man, instinctively rejecting the notion of a miracle while

condescendingly tolerant of benighted believers and religious institutions such as the Catholic Church. No, the Pharisees absolutely accepted miracles and demanded them. But the problem was still a matter of their prior assumptions, beliefs and attitudes. They were hostile towards Jesus Christ, and their request for a sign from heaven was but the manifestation of this hostility. Even if Jesus had provided them with a sign from heaven there and then, they still would not have believed. On one occasion our Lord was teaching a crowd in a filled house and from the roof there was lowered a paralytic on his stretcher. Our Lord proceeded to forgive the man's sins, and by way of proof of his authority to do this, proceeded forthwith to heal the man of his paralysis. But the scribes and Pharisees *immediately* went into consultation with one another on how to *do away* with him. The miracle had absolutely no effect. In our Gospel today, our Lord sees in the hearts of his interlocutors the same hostile attitude of heart. Miracles would have no effect on them. They asked for a

sign from heaven. He gave forth a deep sigh, and left them.

Let us take our brief Gospel passage today as a reminder of something of fundamental importance in any religious life and in life in general. I refer to the state of a *man's heart*. Everything depends on this. God asks of us that we love him with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. With such an attitude we shall be open to all that God chooses to do in our regard. Let us then give him our hearts and follow him to the end. We shall indeed see many signs of his Person and his love.



Tuesday of the sixth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 31 (30):3-4 Be my protector, O God, a mighty stronghold to save me. For you are my rock, my stronghold! Lead me, guide me, for the sake of your name.

Collect O God, who teach us that you abide in hearts that are just and true, grant that we may be so fashioned by your grace as to become a dwelling pleasing to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: James 1:12-18; Psalm 93; Mark 8:14-21

The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat. Be careful, Jesus warned them. Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod. They discussed this with one another and said, It is because we have no bread. Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: Why are you talking about

having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up? Twelve, they replied. And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up? They answered, Seven. He said to them, Do you still not understand? (Mark 8:14-21)

True sight She never had an advanced formal education. She was born into an ordinary farming family that did not have access to sophisticated schooling, but she went to what was available. She finished her primary education in the small state school in the farming district where she lived, and then did one or two years of secondary schooling. Then she stayed at home working in the house and on the farm. She was an intelligent girl, though not much of a reader because she did not grow up with many books. She was raised by her parents in her Catholic faith and there was never any doubt in her mind

about the reality of God, nor about Christ. Her knowledge of these unseen realities was nourished mainly by her straightforward knowledge of the catechism, her personal and family piety, her attendance at Mass and the Sacraments when they were available, and her simple faith in the Church. She could not see God nor Christ, of course, but she knew they were there. She loved Christ, just as she loved the members of her own family and her relatives and friends. She married at a young age, went on to have a large family, lived to an advanced age and through it all the principal reality which filled her mind and heart was unseen. It was *God*. She knew him and loved him, and died, Rosary beads in her hands, with this sure and certain knowledge, in the fullness of her years. Decades later she was forgotten, as was her inner life, but unbeknown to her descendants, her life had been signally successful. *Eternal life is this*, Jesus Christ said at the Last Supper, *to know you, Father and Jesus Christ whom you have sent*. That is what summed up her life — she had known the one true God and had lived faithfully in this

knowledge. She had a cousin, the grandson of her religious grandparents, and the son of her religious aunt. His case was very different. He fell away from his Catholic Faith, and lost the knowledge of God. By the end of his life, he did not know God — God was not a reality to him. He did not see nor understand. This loss of spiritual sight, this inability to understand, this imperviousness of heart, was not openly deliberate. It was the result of countless, daily, barely conscious decisions, finally leaving him blind to the great reality of God.

There is something awesome about the drama of each person's awareness. What is he aware of? Why is it that some people are profoundly aware of God, and others of much greater intellect and formal education are not? A young man of exceptional intellect gains a scholarship — say, a Rhodes — to do advanced study in philosophy in Oxford. He is interested in theism, the question of God. He writes a thesis that receives high commendation from the University and it is published by Oxford University Press. He does well in his academic career, at first

returning to his home country to a position in a philosophy department of one of the premier universities, and then secures a post back at Oxford. His academic interest remains theism, and he writes extensively on the subject — but he actually is an unbeliever. He has no personal knowledge of God and his professional life is spent largely advocating the view that true, objective knowledge of God is impossible. It is in this area of his discipline that his reputation lies. However, towards the end of his life of books and teaching, he comes to see that the Argument from Design or Order has merit. There is a Mind behind the universe. There is an intelligent Author of all — and this is as far as he ever gets. When all is said and done, how poorly he compares with our ordinary mother who knew God and Christ so well. How great the drama of each person's awareness! It is a true drama, what we know and do not know of Reality — in this case, of the great God. But there is a deeper drama still, and that is the workings of the heart. It is this which is decisive. How clear it is that what we *know* will in considerable measure

depend on what we *want* — and this brings us to our Lord's words in today's Gospel. Were Christ to be present at the discussion of religion among many of the "educated," would he not say, as he says in our Gospel today: "*Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember?*" (Mark 8:14-21). There are many reasons why people do not know God, and we cannot be simplistic in accounting for it. But one important reason is the secret *wish and choice of the heart*.

Life is short, very short, and eternity is long, very long. We cannot even imagine the length of eternity, and we do not know how short our lives will be. But the stakes are very high. Each of us is on a knife-edge which at a moment could find us before the very judgement of God. Then all will be revealed. All that our heart has secretly wished, all that we have chosen to do, to think or to be, will be in the full blaze of the sight of God. There will be no evading the consequences of our choices, because those choices will have determined what we are aware of, and

what we have become. Let us take in hand the gift of freedom that is ours, and choose, from the core of our hearts, to know, love and serve God here on earth so as to see and enjoy him forever in heaven. If we find it hard to make this choice, pray for God's help to do it.



Wednesday of the sixth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 31 (30):3-4 Be my protector, O God, a mighty stronghold to save me. For you are my rock, my stronghold! Lead me, guide me, for the sake of your name.

Collect O God, who teach us that you abide in hearts that are just and true, grant that we may be so fashioned by your grace as to become a dwelling pleasing to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: James 1: 19-27; Psalm 14; Mark 8:22-26

They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spat on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, Do you see anything? He looked up and said, I see people; they look like trees walking around.

Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Jesus sent him home, saying, Don't go into the village. (Mark 8: 22-26)

The ways of God Our Lord is approaching the town of Nain and many are accompanying him. As he draws near, out from the town there comes a funeral procession. At a glance our Lord sees what has happened. There on the funeral bier is being carried the body of a young man — his features show he has died in the prime of life. Closely accompanying him is his widowed mother, absolutely sunk in grief. Her husband has gone from this life, and now it is her son. She has nothing, and all she can do is trust in God. Our Lord's heart swells with compassion, and without a word being said to him he moves towards the procession and with a sign of his hand stops it. All look at him in wonderment as he leans slightly over the body and said, "*Young man, I say to you, arise!*" No-one asked for this initiative, and no-one expected it. Instantly and incredibly, the young man's eyes

open. He raises himself, leaning on one arm. He looks about, and deftly swings his legs to sit up. Holding his hand, our Lord lightly draws him from the funeral bier to his feet, and there the young man stands, brimming with health, looking at his astonished mother. Our Lord, smiling, presents him to her, pauses, and then moves on. That was a case in which our Lord acted without any request at all, and the benefit was instantaneous and immense. At times God answers our needs without being explicitly asked to do so. Let us turn to a different scene — people arrive interceding with our Lord for the local centurion. His servant is gravely ill, they tell our Lord, and he is worthy of your help for he loves our people. *I will come and see him*, our Lord replies. We know the upshot — but the point here is that in this case our Lord is responding to a prayer presented to him not by the person in need but by *others on his behalf*. On another occasion the blind man, Bar-Timaeus, vociferously called to our Lord over the heads of the crowd and caught his attention. Once in Christ's presence, he asked for a miracle, which

was immediately granted him. With his sight wondrously restored, he followed Jesus along the way. There are a variety of ways in which our Lord is seen responding in mercy to human need. The normal way is simply to ask him.

However, it was not always as simple as that — and in any case not every request received the instant answer given to Bar-Timaeus. In fact, some requests were refused. Simon Peter made one request that touched our Lord's redemptive mission. He *asked* our Lord to cease all thought of suffering and dying. This must not happen to you, he said to Jesus, for you are the Messiah! This request received a powerful and public rebuff. *Get behind me, Satan!* was our Lord's response to his chief Apostle. Another request made by James and John, two of his Apostles, was also refused. They asked that they be granted places at our Lord's right and left in his kingdom. Our Lord's response? Such places, our Lord said, were for *those allotted to them by my Father*. He did not simply say, yes — they are yours. On another occasion the man

from the Decapolis region who had been delivered from a terrible case of possession, begged our Lord to let him follow him. This request was refused. No — you are to *go back to your people and tell them of the good things God has done for you.* This the man obediently did. Why was there this difference in responding to requests and human need? We are not told, but we know it was because the incarnate Son of God judged it best. The man of the Decapolis became an early proclaimer of Jesus Christ to his own people who were Gentiles, in our Lord's own lifetime. Simon Peter received the grace to follow our Lord in martyrdom, as did James and John. In our Gospel passage today (Mark 8: 22-26), we have something different again. We read that *"They came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village."* Why did he not just heal the blind man, and get on with it? We are not told. But there is more. *"When he had spat on the man's eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, Do you see anything? He*

looked up and said, I see people; they look like trees walking around. Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly." This looks unnecessary, but not so. Christ knows best.

If we think it will pleasing to God that we ask him for something, then we ought ask for it and persistently. Our Lord tells us to ask, and we shall receive. He says elsewhere that we ought *pray always and never lose heart*. Our Gospel passage today surely shows us, among other things, that the ways of God are far above our ways, and that in his wisdom God may respond to our heartfelt prayer in ways that will test our faith. But this is to be expected because, unlike us, he is infinite in every way. His holiness, his wisdom and his power are beyond our imagining. Let us trust him whatever life may bring, always praying for his help and grace, always thanking, always praising.



Thursday of the sixth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 31 (30):3-4 Be my protector, O God, a mighty stronghold to save me. For you are my rock, my stronghold! Lead me, guide me, for the sake of your name.

Collect O God, who teach us that you abide in hearts that are just and true, grant that we may be so fashioned by your grace as to become a dwelling pleasing to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: James 2:1-9; Psalm 33; Mark 8:27-33

Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, Who do people say I am? They replied, Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets. But what about you? he asked. Who do you say I am? Peter answered, You are the Christ. Jesus warned them not to

tell anyone about him. He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be put to death and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. Get behind me, Satan! he said. You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men. (Mark 8:27-33)

Christ the Centre

Consider the patriarch Abraham, our father in the Faith, as St Paul calls him. His life's work was to enter into a personal covenant with the Lord, leaving his homeland in obedience to the divine call and settling in the land indicated to him from above. The focus of his life was the Lord, the God of his personal life, with whom he now had a personal relationship. If anyone were to have asked Abraham, who do people say *you* are? he would have thought that a very secondary and even irrelevant question. What mattered to him was not who people said *he* was, but who the *Lord* was and the promises

he had given in his covenant. The same could be said of Isaac and Jacob — what mattered was their *God*, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their descendants. Centuries later, at the rise of Moses, the God of the patriarchs and their descendants became, formally speaking, the God of a chosen people, the Hebrews. A covenant was established between God and a chosen people — not just certain chosen individuals. Moses could be said to be the human architect of this transition. As with Abraham, so with Moses — if anyone were to have asked who *he*, Moses, was — Moses would have regarded this as a very secondary and even irrelevant question. The important thing was who *Yahweh* was, and the covenant he had established with his chosen people. As with Abraham, the Patriarchs and Moses, so it was with the prophets. They bore witness to the reality of *Yahweh* God and the requirements of his covenant with his people. Especially binding was the first of all the commandments of this covenant — that there were to be no gods venerated by the people other than he, the Lord. We think of Elijah, Elisha,

Isaiah, Jeremiah and the rest, right up to John the Baptist. When the scribes and Pharisees came to John asking who *he* was, John said, in effect, I am *no-one and nothing*. I am a mere voice crying in the wilderness: Prepare a way for the Lord. The important question was not who I am, but who *he* is, he, the One who is coming. The Hebrew Scriptures and the Hebrew tradition all bear witness to the one important Reality: the *God of the Covenant*. It is he, the Lord, who matters.

But something entirely new appeared on the scene with Jesus Christ. In his well-known book, *A Rabbi talks with Jesus*, a 161 page work published in 1993, Rabbi Jacob Neusner imagines having a dialogue with a Jewish master of Christ's era about the teaching of Jesus. What did Jesus leave out of the Torah? he asked. Nothing, was the answer. Then what did he add? *Himself*, was the answer. So *that* was the great addition which Jesus Christ brought to the Torah, according to Neusner. Pope Benedict XVI in the first volume of his work on Jesus Christ took up Neusner's point. Neusner concluded that Jesus must be

rejected for abandoning the Torah, while Pope Benedict XVI writes that Neusner the Jew has helped to bring out the absolutely distinctive thing about Jesus Christ and his teaching. At the heart of Christ's revelation is the revelation about *himself*. *He* is the Object of the Gospel. *He* is the heart and soul of Revelation. The entire Scriptures point to *him*, and not just to a certain teaching, contained in, or even added to, the Torah. His very *Person* is what has been added. As St Paul wrote, *this is the mystery now revealed, Christ in you, your hope of glory*. Our Gospel today (Mark 8:27-33) is one of the high-points of our Lord's public ministry. Our Lord does not ask his disciples what people say he is teaching. He does not ask them, what are the scribes and Pharisees saying that I teach about the Sabbath observance? He does not ask, what are the common people saying is the essence of my teaching on the Kingdom of God? He wants to know, rather, who do people say *I am*? That is the important thing, and it is clearly the important thing as we read all four Gospels. Jacob Neusner could see this with all clarity, and gradually

the scribes and Pharisees saw it too. Jesus Christ went to his death above all because of who *he* claimed to be. *Are you the Christ, the Son of the living God?* the high priest asked him under oath. Our Lord replied — after maintaining silence in the face of all other questions and accusations — that he was, and that they would see him coming on the clouds of heaven at the right hand of God. At this he was sentenced to death. The Christian religion is not just the acceptance of and obedience to revealed teaching on how we are to live. The Christian religion is the acceptance of the *Person* of Jesus Christ as Son of God and Son of Man, Saviour of the world, and source of redemption and sanctification of man. Our whole life is a vocation to know, love and serve Jesus Christ, so as to see and enjoy him forever in heaven. It is commonly thought that to be a good Christian one must be kind and charitable, and that is the end of it. But no. To be a true Christian one must accept Christ's teaching about *himself*, and then base one's entire life, whatever be the cost, on this acceptance.



Friday of the sixth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 31 (30):3-4 Be my protector, O God, a mighty stronghold to save me. For you are my rock, my stronghold! Lead me, guide me, for the sake of your name.

Collect O God, who teach us that you abide in hearts that are just and true, grant that we may be so fashioned by your grace as to become a dwelling pleasing to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Genesis 11:1-9; Psalm 32; Mark 8:34-9:1

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world,

yet lose his life? Or what can a man give in exchange for his life? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels. And he said to them, I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God come with power. (Mark 8:34-9:1)

The Cross Man has a natural desire to be successful in his work — he instinctively wants to do “good work.” The question, though, turns on what it is to be “successful,” and what “good work” is, in the long run. For instance, one person who did very good work was the priest, John Lingard (1771-1851), noted historian of England who, though, has been largely forgotten over the last century and a half. He was one of the last priests to be educated at the English College in Douai, France, and was one of the founders of Ushaw, Douai's successor in the north of England. During his years teaching at Ushaw he discovered his interest in and talent for historical scholarship and writing. He resolved to leave seminary

work and take a small rural parish near Lancaster. There he spent the remaining decades of his life quietly serving his parish and writing his monumental volumes on the *History of England*. He resolutely refused being made a bishop and any other form of advancement — so as to be able to do his chosen work for God and the Church. This work was the writing of history and various other religious writings. He wrote the famous hymn, “Hail Queen of Heaven!” He was commended by the Pope of the time with a triple doctorate, and praised highly at his death. He did good work for Christ and the Church. Lingard’s reputation was well established when John Henry Newman entered the Catholic Church (at the end of 1845) after a distinguished though controversial career as leader of the Oxford Movement. If ever there was one who showed singular promise as a writer it was Newman, and throughout his Catholic life he was regarded as one of its most eminent, though controversial, divines. But in so many ways, his promise was frustrated, and it was frustrated in large measure by Church authority. At every

point he was obedient to the Church. On his conversion he was called to Oscott, and he went. When sent to Rome, he went. When placed in Birmingham, he went. When called to lead the Catholic University in Ireland, he went. When asked to take charge of a new translation of the Scriptures he did so. When asked to take charge of the Mission to Oxford, he did so. The notable feature of his Catholic years was that he could have done outstanding work in each of these fields, but was frustrated or prevented in the doing of it.

Many, knowing Newman's potential and attainments, have wished that he had been placed in a situation that would have allowed his talents their full scope. But Newman's choice lay in obedience. In fact, he did exceptional work as a Catholic, but his path was burdened by the cross. While he was the object of suspicion and non-acceptance by many, he obeyed God and the Church. He accepted the cross, did all he could with integrity, and at length as a simple priest was crowned with the cardinalate by Pope Leo XIII. His greatest attainment was

holiness of life amid the constant pressure of daily work for the Lord. At this point, he is the first Englishman to be canonised from the last three centuries, an outstanding example of a very human saint and one of the greatest of modern divines. A most obvious point to be taken from the life of Saint John Henry Newman is that, despite appearances, the cross is the path to true fruitfulness. It led Newman to sanctity and to subsequent fame in and out of the Church. His life and work has been blessed by God with fruit that has lasted. In our Gospel passage today (Mark 8:34-9:1), our Lord states firmly and clearly to both his disciples and to the crowd that *“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it.”* Time and again in the history of the Church those who have done exceptionally good work are seen to be set aside, forgotten, and left seemingly to languish. Mysteriorously, it is not the case with others. Mother Teresa of Calcutta lived in the light of fame and

influence, as did her friend, Pope John Paul II. Their crosses were different. Others have been ignored, set aside, replaced. Whatever be the cross, we have it on the word of our Lord that there most assuredly will be the cross if we are serious about the following of him. It is one of the deepest mysteries of life, that the worst feature of life — human frustration and suffering — is the source of the most long-lasting good. Jesus Christ himself is the first and iconic instance of this, and the saints follow suit. There are many unique features of the teaching and the example of Jesus Christ. One such is his teaching on the Cross, and his own example in respect to it. Our natural inclination is to recoil from suffering. This is natural, and good in a certain sense. If we did not recoil from suffering, the results would be disastrous. But if our path is one of obedience to God, and then suffering comes, then that suffering will not be ultimately disastrous but full of fruitfulness. Let the suffering Christ be our inspiration and our guide, together with the saints who followed him.



Saturday of the sixth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 31 (30):3-4 Be my protector, O God, a mighty stronghold to save me. For you are my rock, my stronghold! Lead me, guide me, for the sake of your name.

Collect O God, who teach us that you abide in hearts that are just and true, grant that we may be so fashioned by your grace as to become a dwelling pleasing to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: James 3:1-10; Psalm 11; Mark 9:2-13

After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Peter said to

Jesus, Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three tents — one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah. (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.) Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: This is my beloved Son. Listen to him! Suddenly, when they looked round, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what rising from the dead meant. And they asked him, Why do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first? Jesus replied, To be sure, Elijah will come first, and restore all things. Why then is it written that the Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected? But I tell you, Elijah has come, and they have done to him everything they wished, just as it is written about him. (Mark 9:2-13)

Listen to him! There is no-one in the history of the world who worked such a range of miracles and with such ease as did Jesus Christ. At a word he changed a

considerable quantity of water into beautiful wine. He cured persons afflicted with a great range of maladies and raised people from the dead. On at least two occasions he fed a great crowd of people with a mere handful of food. With a mere word he calmed a ferocious storm at sea. He walked on the surging Sea of Galilee. In the Garden of Gethsemane, his enemies fell back before him and then arrested him — only, as was obvious, because he permitted it. He drove out devils from persons possessed by them. There was nothing he could not do, if he chose to do it — save forcing a person's free will. But there are two miracles of his public ministry which are arguably the greatest — one at the threshold of his ministry, the other towards the end, and they are done on him. I refer to the intervention of the heavenly Father to bear witness to his divine Son. At our Lord's baptism, the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove, and the Father declared from heaven that here stood his beloved Son. There is no parallel to this in the Scriptures before him. Moses was the *friend* of God, but not divinely-declared to be his *beloved*

Son. The prophets were God's *servants*. Here was his Son. Our Gospel today describes the second such event, Christ's Transfiguration on the Mount towards the end of his ministry. It is described in detail by each of the three Synoptic Gospels (in Matthew 17:1-9, Mark 9:2-8, and Luke 9:28-36), in less detail in the Second Letter of Peter (2 Peter 1:16-18), and perhaps it is referred to obliquely in John 1:14, when he writes that "*we saw his glory, the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father.*" It is an event that obviously complements our Lord's baptism, revealing our Lord's divinity, while pointing to his death, resurrection and ascension. Our Lord's ministry principally turned on the question of his identity, and a critical point was reached when our Lord asked his disciples who they said he was (Mark 8: 27-38). Their response led to his teaching about the cross in his and their life. Almost immediately after, there is the account of his Transfiguration.

There are differences in the three Gospel accounts of this event. Matthew speaks of their ascending "a high mountain" whereas both Mark and Luke refer to it as a

“mountain.” Matthew speaks of Christ’s face shining like the sun, and Luke of the appearance of his face becoming different. Mark only describes the radiance and extreme whiteness of his clothes — which the others mention too. All three narrate the appearance of Moses and Elijah conversing with the transfigured Christ. All three describe the voice of the Father from within the cloud — and Matthew tells us that the cloud was bright. It overshadowed the three disciples witnessing the unforgettable event. Each of the Synoptics has a slightly different wording in the utterance of the Father. Mark reports the words of the Father as being, “*This is my beloved Son. Hear him.*” In Luke the Father says, “*This is my Son, my Chosen One. Hear him.*” In Matthew the wording is “*This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear him.*” In each case, Moses representing the Law, and Elijah representing the prophets, bear witness to Jesus as the culmination of the Old Testament and as the expected Messiah. In our Gospel today (Mark 9:2-13), Mark tells us (as does Matthew) that Moses and Elijah

were talking with Jesus, but Mark does not tell us what they were discussing. Luke helps us here, for he says that they were discussing the “*exodus which he would accomplish in Jerusalem.*” Christ was the new Moses who would lead his people out of the great slavery (of sin) into the Promised Land of the Kingdom. Most notably of all, the Father reveals from heaven the true identity of Jesus Christ. He is the Son of God to whom all should listen. This is surely the greatest miracle of the period of Christ’s public ministry and it was witnessed by the three principal Apostles, whom St Paul refers to as those counted as the pillars of the infant Church. What happened to Jesus of Nazareth on the Mountain has never happened to anyone else in the history of the world. God pointed to a man and said he is *my beloved Son*. All are to listen to him. How displeasing are we to God, then, if we knowingly refuse to do so!

St John, the author of the fourth Gospel, tells us that the first of Christ’s signs which let his glory be seen was that which was worked at the marriage feast of Cana. It

was initiated by a word from the mother of Jesus. She said to him, “*They have no wine.*” There was another thing that was said by her, and these two statements are the only words recorded by the Gospels as coming from Mary during the period of Christ’s public ministry and after. They were addressed to the servants at the wedding feast: “*Do whatever he tells you.*” This is exactly what the Father is telling the Apostles on the Mount: “*Listen to him.*” Let that be our plan of life, then. Let us listen to him in everything, doing whatever he tells us to do. We must hear the word of God as it comes from the Word made flesh, and then faithfully put it into practice.



Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 13 (12):6 O Lord, I trust in your merciful love. My heart will rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord who has been bountiful with me.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that, always pondering spiritual things, we may carry out in both word and deed that which is pleasing to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Leviticus 19:1-2,17-18; Psalm 102;
1 Corinthians 3:16-23; Matthew 5:38-48

You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who

wants to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:38-48)

Our dignity I remember watching a nature documentary — a pride of lions in an African country was being filmed. The officers of the reserve shot one of the lionesses with a dart to put it to sleep. The dart was shot, it hit its mark and the lioness began to react. The others in the pride immediately sensed something was wrong with the lioness. She was weaker and, interestingly, they began to *attack* her. As she became weaker, their *attacks* increased. The lion that was head of the pride attacked too. The officers

knew that the life of the lioness was in danger, so they drove their large vehicle towards the pride, hoping that it would scare off the lions and leave the lioness sedated and free from attacks. This is what happened, and they were able to place the unconscious animal in their vehicle for further examination and preparation. But the interesting thing about this incident was that as soon as the lioness appeared to be failing in some way, its companions attacked it. I remember watching another nature film, this time of a large family of wild dogs. In one litter there was a pup which for some reason was increasingly attacked by its own pup companions. There was no relief for the unfortunate pup which became weaker and more isolated. Finally the head of the pack itself attacked and killed the pup. To normal human sensibilities, in both cases this savage instinct appeared mercilessly inconsiderate of the worth of an animal companion, simply because of its perceived weakness. Now, I have always thought that one of the many absorbing things about the animal world is that it can, for the close observer, highlight distinguishing traits

of *humankind*. There are many things which mankind and the animal kingdom have in common, but there are profound differences. These differences can set forth the distinctive qualities and endowments of man. Plainly, an animal is incapable of self-reflection. It has no sense of the objective being of things. Nor can it form mental abstractions, such as an idea of virtue. It cannot engage in language, though it communicates to a point. It is incapable of true (selfless) love and of religion. It is driven by its instincts that serve its needs — and so it is not responsible for its actions. Man is able to recognize and respect the inherent dignity of his fellow man. The lions and the wild pups had no sense of the inherent worth and dignity of a weaker companion.

It is a fundamental endowment of the human person that he can recognize his own dignity and the dignity of others however weak they may be. There are many (modern) philosophers who do not allow the idea of the inherent dignity of man. I remember years ago presenting an essay in a Philosophy Department of an Australian University,

and the lecturer who examined the essay stated on the margin that he did not know what the idea of *human dignity* meant. He did not accept that there is such a thing. It is true that while "dignity" is a term with a long philosophical history, it is rarely *defined* in political, legal and scientific discussions. It is obvious that there is widespread disagreement about the content of dignity, and this comes down to a disagreement about the nature of that which is said to have inherent dignity. If you think that, in the final analysis, man is no different from an animal, then what is the use of any talk about his *special* dignity? The wild dogs I mentioned destroyed newly born pups if their numbers threatened their food supply. If man is of the same order of things as animals, why ought he act differently towards his own kind? So it is that "ethics" should turn not on the principle of utility or convenience, nor on mere law, nor on some vague sense of obligation, but on the principle of objective human dignity. What is the basis of man's dignity? Its basis is man's true and total nature. You must not murder, nor calumniate, nor steal, because of man's

very dignity as a person in his own right and a child of God. Now, the greatest appreciation of the dignity of each and every man, and the greatest conferral of this dignity, has come in historical Revelation — and in particular in the teaching and work of Jesus Christ, man's Redeemer and God. He, Son of God and son of man, has loved each of us to the end. The incarnate God laid down his life for the least, and has taught that whatever is done to the least of us his brothers, he counts as having been done to him. He conferred a stupendous dignity on all, and taught us the dignity even of our enemies. We are to *love* them: "*I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous*" (Matthew 5: 44-45).

Christ has taught that we should have the utmost respect for our own dignity as children of our heavenly Father and members of Jesus Christ. But this means living our vocation to the fullest — seeking the perfection of life in

Christ. This means seeking the perfection of a life of love after the model of Jesus Christ. The sense of our own dignity ought lead us to the Cross, just as it led Jesus Christ to the Cross. Our greatest dignity lies in our being called to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, and this has an immediate ethical bearing. It means fulfilling his commandments: *if you love me*, he said, *you will keep my commandments*. Whatever be the cost, let us do this, then!

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.2284-2301 (Respect for personal dignity)



Monday of the seventh week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 13 (12):6 O Lord, I trust in your merciful love. My heart will rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord who has been bountiful with me.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that, always pondering spiritual things, we may carry out in both word and deed that which is pleasing to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: James 3:13-18; Psalm 18; Mark 9:14-29

As Jesus came down from the mountain with Peter, James, John and came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him. What are you arguing with them about? he asked. A man in the crowd answered, Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech.

Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not. O unbelieving generation, Jesus replied, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me. So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth. Jesus asked the boy's father, How long has he been like this? From childhood, he answered. It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us. 'If you can'? said Jesus. Everything is possible for him who believes. Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, I do believe; help my unbelief! When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the evil spirit. You deaf and mute spirit, he said, I command you, come out of him and never enter him again. The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, He's dead. But Jesus took him by

the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up. After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, Why couldn't we drive it out? He replied, This kind can come out only by prayer. (Mark 9:14-29)

Pray for it! I have read on various occasions that during his long pontificate Pope John Paul II performed at least three exorcisms. It seems that the last of them occurred in about September of 2000. The reported circumstances — which I never had time to investigate properly — were that as the Pope was leaving at the end of a general audience, a girl near the front began screaming incomprehensibly and speaking in a “cavernous voice.” As security personnel struggled to restrain her “superhuman” efforts to break free, Bishop Gianni Danzi, a top Vatican City official, alerted the Pope, who returned to the scene. He took her apart and attempted to exorcize the demon from the girl. It is said that the Pope spent more than half an hour praying over the girl and ordering a demon to leave her, but failed to fully cure her. He tried to console her, and promised that the next day, Thursday morning, he

would celebrate his Mass for her. One interesting thing about this case is that the next day, the well-known exorcist of Rome at the time, Father Gabriele Amorth, said he had performed an exorcism on the girl the previous day. Father Amorth said that after the girl met with the Pope, Bishop Danzi and he performed another exorcism that lasted for two hours. During that exorcism, the priest said, the demon mocked the Pope, saying, “Not even your head can send me away.” The demon was referring to a great Pope and a saint. We are surely reminded of our Lord’s words in today’s Gospel. Jesus had just exorcised a demon from “a boy,” and the demon had resisted all attempts by Christ’s disciples to drive it out. The demon had possessed the boy from his childhood, so presumably the possession was not due to moral failure on his part, for at the time he was then a child. But mysteriously, the demon had attained a tremendous hold, and perhaps enmeshed itself deeply in the spiritual and physical constitution of the growing boy. I speculate that the demon’s grasp could have been enabled the greater by its early access to the developing inner

structure of the child's growing person. Its resultant hold may have been like a vast system of intricate wiring in myriad directions.

All this was snapped asunder by the power of Christ which reached to every corner of the boy's inner being. The demon was forced out forthwith, but under a tremendous vocal protest, leaving the boy motionless. The disciples asked our Lord why they could not cast it out, and our Lord told them that in the case of some possessions, more was required than mere command. There needed also to be "*prayer*" — some manuscripts adding, "*and fasting*" (Mark 9:14-29). Pope John Paul II would have recognized this, and at the end promised *prayer* for the girl at the general audience. Father Amorth, in his comment on the case of this girl, said that hers was one where the possession is very, very strong and could require years for a full liberation. He said the girl had been possessed since she was 12 years old and was sent to him for consultation by the exorcist of the Archdiocese of Milan, who had never dealt with such a severe case. But now, the point here is

that in such a difficult case, what was to be done? No-one denies that there are great cases of evil and suffering in the world. There was not the slightest suggestion that the girl herself — nor the boy in the Gospel — was to blame for her demonic possession. It is a clear case of the mystery of evil and suffering in the world. The Gospel indicates that *Christ* is the answer, indeed, the *only* answer. He said to his disciples that there are some cases where much more is required of us than a mere calling on the name of Jesus. We must *pray* and *do penance*. Our Lord tells us elsewhere in the Gospel that we are to *pray always and never lose heart*. Even in our passage today (Mark 9:14-29), our Lord tells us that we must not be unbelieving. Our faith will be shown in our persevering *prayer* for those in need, especially for those most in need. Faith is shown in a special way in the readiness to pray perseveringly and insistently for our own needs and the needs of others. Do we pray for our needs, and do we keep up these prayers? All too often we are too lazy to pray for the needs of others, and we have so little faith anyway. We do not

believe sufficiently to keep up a genuine prayer of petition. Let our Lord's words ring in our hearts: all is possible for those who believe.

But let us treasure also the reply of the father of the boy: *“Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, I do believe; help my unbelief!”* What a wonderful prayer! We have faith, but our faith needs to be a lot greater than it is. Let us thank God for the gift of faith, while praying insistently that he will grant that it grow. Lord, help my unbelief! What great good we would do were we to be praying much for the needs of others, praying in faith and with persistence, despite what may seem to be its futility. It will not be futile, for Christ has said so.

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Second reflection: (Mark 9:14 29)

The full meaning of the Scriptures Martin Luther taught that faith alone justifies. He relied on what he understood to be the teaching of St Paul in his Letter to the Romans, and chose virtually to reject the teaching of St James who insisted that faith without works is dead. The memory of Luther's position (condemned by the Council of Trent) reminds us that we should always try to keep in mind the *whole* teaching of Scripture, *all* of Revelation, when reading any part of Scripture. In our Gospel passage today our Lord adds something to what he teaches in other parts of the Gospel. In those other parts Our Lord tells us that if we seek we shall find, if we ask we shall receive, and if we knock we shall have the door opened to us. Here, though, when it came to casting out the devil from the boy and his disciples being unable to cast it out, our Lord told them (according to some manuscripts) that it required both prayer and fasting.

With the Church's teaching and guidance in mind, all our lives let us endeavour to understand the *full* meaning of the Scriptures, especially the full meaning of our Lord's words in the Gospels, so as to know Christ Jesus himself and his mind as fully as possible. Knowing his mind, let us strive to put it on. As St Paul tells us: *Let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.*



Tuesday of the seventh week in Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: James 4:1-10; Psalm 54; Mark 9:30-37

They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise." But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it. They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing

about on the road?” But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.” He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.” (Mark 9: 30-37)

Understanding Animal awareness is a remarkable phenomenon. We take it for granted; it is everywhere; we use it for our own great advantage (as does the farmer use his sheep dogs), and we tend not to give it a second thought. The animal is, of course, pure matter — there is nothing of spirit in it — and its awareness shows that matter is, under the hand of God, capable of various degrees of consciousness. In this it bears the imprint of its Creator. Just as there is, we might say, an ascending scale in animal constitution and perfection, so there is in animal awareness. The butterfly has a certain awareness, while

the eagle or the lioness or the dexterous chimpanzee has a much greater and more complex power of awareness. The awareness possessed by the dog and its consequent bonding with its human masters has led it to be nicknamed as “man’s best friend.” But there are limits to its awareness, of course. It is not aware of *itself* as an independent *thing*. Nor is it aware of anything like *classes* of things — which is to say, it cannot grasp *an abstraction*. I remember watching a kangaroo which had somehow bonded with a group of horses. Wherever the horses went, the kangaroo would hop along with them. But, like the horses themselves, it had no “idea” that it was a “kangaroo” and that they were “horses.” These are the distinctive features of human awareness, requiring a mind that is spiritual in principle. Still, the vastness of awareness in the animal and insect kingdoms is a mighty phenomenon of our world. But all this pales before the splendour of *human* awareness. Man’s glory is that he knows that he himself *exists* and that the world and the universe *exist*. He is endowed with a mind that is capable

of knowing real things, and knowing them precisely as being real. He can also come to know the *nature* of things ever more deeply. Further, he is not driven by an instinctive sense of what he needs. The animal does “choose” (we might say) between courses of action, but it does not choose *freely*. It has to act according as its instinct directs, its instinct being its sense of the course that is best for itself. The instincts of some animals are amazing — especially when hunting for food. But man is free and is not, in principle, driven by instinct — though he can sink somewhat to this level. Man can come to know what is ultimately best and choose accordingly, even to the point of foregoing his very life for what is morally right.

All this is simply to present the great fact of man’s power to know and understand things, and to seek and attain insight — which brings us to our Gospel passage today (Mark 9: 30-37). Man’s greatest endeavour, in terms of awareness and insight, is his effort to know the ultimate Reality. He wants to know the gods. At his best, man wants to know the one God and to be in communion with

him. This is his highest quest and his best happiness, but he cannot get there because of his fallen condition. But God in his merciful love has entered our world and the human scene to reveal himself and his loving plan for man. Thus it is that the highest and best use of man's power to know and understand is precisely in knowing the God of historical revelation and his saving plan. This plan is revealed in his incarnate Son, Jesus Christ. When Christ took his three companions with him up the high mountain not long before his Passion and Death, there on the mountain the voice of the Father was heard, and Christ himself was transfigured in glory. What did the Father say to the three disciples, and through them to all of Christ's disciples, and through them to the whole world? *"This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him"* (Mark 9:7). To know the one true God and his plan for man, one must listen to Jesus Christ, accepting him as God's Beloved Son, and wholeheartedly accept his teaching. But — and this is our special point here — it is not just a matter of man exercising his innate power of understanding. Man is

especially prone to error and darkness for a variety of reasons, especially moral. He needs light from on high. He needs the gifts of faith and divine wisdom, and this need of his is brought home to us in our Gospel passage today, in which is described the lack of understanding of our Lord's very disciples. We read that *"They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.'"* But we then read: *"they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it."* They did not understand the teaching of their divine Master whom they so loved. Thus are we reminded of the grandeur and the poverty of human understanding, especially in respect to the things of God.

Light would be given to the disciples when the Holy Spirit arrived with power at Pentecost, and as our Lord said, he, the Holy Spirit, would remind them of what Jesus had said, and would lead them to the full truth. As we

think of the disciples failing to understand the summit of our Lord's life and redemptive work — his Passion, Death and Resurrection — let us be very aware of our need for the aid of the divine Spirit. He is the Spirit who enlightened the prophets, the Spirit who constantly led our Lord — the Spirit of the Father and the Son. He is the one who grants the gifts of faith, wisdom and understanding, and the grace to desire to live wholly according to this light.



Wednesday of the seventh week in Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: James 4:13-17; Psalm 48; Mark 9:38-40

John said to Jesus, Teacher, we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us. Do not stop him, Jesus said. No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment speak ill of me, for whoever is not against us is for us. (Mark 9:38-40)

Do not stop him

In the eighteenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, there is narrated the interesting incident of the encounter with Apollos. Luke is describing the journeys of Paul — after spending some time in Antioch, he went around the territory of Galatia and Phrygia (18: 22-23). Suddenly we are introduced to “*a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man, and powerful in his mastery of the Scriptures.*” It looks as if he was a man of considerable education, steeped in the Scriptures — which is to say, in the Old Testament, and with great talent in eloquence and teaching. Alexandria, of course, was a great centre of Jewish life — Josephus was from Alexandria, as had been Philo. There is no suggestion that Apollos had had any contact with the Apostles or the Church in Jerusalem. But “*he was instructed in the way of the Lord and was fervent in spirit.*” Further, “*he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus.*” So Apollos, raised and educated in Alexandria, thoroughly versed in the Scriptures, had become involved with Christians and had been instructed

in the Christian Way. The upshot was that he underwent a conversion to Jesus Christ, so great as to become a missionary himself. He was travelling around preaching the name of Jesus, and doing so “*accurately.*” His “accurate” teaching of the things of Jesus must have been in certain spheres of Christian doctrine only and not in others, because he himself knew only the baptism of John (18: 25). He came to Ephesus where he “*began to speak boldly in the synagogue*” — and Priscilla and Aquila (associates of Paul, as in Acts 18: 18) took him aside and told him more of “*the way of God.*” This fuller instruction may have included the gift of the Spirit at Baptism. He must have been open to this instruction because “*the brethren wrote (to Achaia) asking the disciples to receive him.*” When he went there he “*greatly strengthened those who through the grace of God had become believers.*” We then read what might have been the content of Apollos’s “accurate” teaching about Jesus: “*He was vigorous in his refutation of the Jewish party as he went about establishing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Messiah.*”

The point I am making here is that here we have an example of one who had not been *fully* instructed in the Way, but who, as far as his knowledge went, was excellently instructed, and was exemplary in his personal fervour and missionary spirit. In his *eloquence* he may have outshone Paul himself. He was not deputed by the Apostles, and there is no mention of prior contact by him with the Church of Jerusalem. Now, what did the disciples do with him? Did they say to him — look here! What are you doing? Where did you get permission to speak on Jesus Christ? No, we read that they were courteous, encouraging, welcoming, and they entered into dialogue with him. Priscilla and Aquila “*took him home and explained the way of God to him*” (18:26). Apollos was sincere, of good faith, and with all his learning was very open to instruction. He was immediately welcomed into the fuller Christian community — that which was in communion with Paul and the Apostles. That is not to say that he did not need further instruction still, but the point here is to notice the policy of the disciples towards those

who were “instructed in the way of the Lord” *to a point*, and who were speaking “the things of the Lord” accurately but only *to a point*, missing other very important elements of the Christian message. It was a policy of brotherly charity and of courteous dialogue, drawing the person in question into a fuller knowledge of and communion with the “way of God.” We notice something of the same thing when Paul visits Ephesus and finds “*certain disciples*” who know nothing of the reception of the Holy Spirit at Baptism, but only of John’s baptism (Acts 19: 1-4). Paul led them to a fuller Christian faith and practice. All this brings us to our Gospel today (Mark 9:38-40), in which John says to our Lord that “*we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us. Do not stop him, Jesus said. No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment speak ill of me, for whoever is not against us is for us.*” There is a very strong tradition that John himself spent years in Ephesus, where there had been these inadequately instructed disciples.

Let us strive to be very, very charitable, while all the time absolutely adhering to the truth as proclaimed by the Church built by Christ upon Peter. We ought look on all who speak with love for Jesus as our brothers — separated, perhaps, but brothers nevertheless. Our Gospel text today even suggests that they may, occasionally, do miracles in his name. If they do good in the name of Jesus Christ, they will not speak ill of him — so let us always treat them as our brothers, and brothers of Jesus Christ. Let us share with them our fuller and truer teaching, knowing that if it is accepted, they may well go on to do more good for Jesus Christ than we. Many have done so.

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Second reflection: (Mark 9:38-40)

Our separated brethren One of the very great features of the modern Church is its ecumenical outreach. The Church formally regards the faithful of non-Catholic

Christian Churches and Communion as *brethren*. They are separated brethren and we join with them in a common search for Christian unity. We are exhorted to love our separated brothers and sisters and to recognise all that is positive in them and in their teaching. This attitude we surely see in Our Lord himself in today's brief Gospel passage (Mark 9:40). It was John — the disciple who in his Letters places so much stress on brotherly love — who said to Jesus that they had tried to stop someone casting out devils in his name. Our Lord told them not to stop the person who is doing good things in his name. Such a person is to be regarded not as some kind of enemy but as a friend and ally. He is for us, not against us.

Let us in our daily sphere of influence endeavour to build bonds of love and communion with believers in the name of Christ who are separated from us. Let us be genuinely ecumenical.



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Scripture today: James 5:1-6; Psalm 48; Mark 9:41-50

Jesus said to his disciples: I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward. And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire

never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.' Everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other. (Mark 9:41-50)

Sin and the Unseen

It is a pity that we do not have time in life to pursue so many fields of immense interest. When I was a child I was fascinated with astronomy, and in one parish in which I served we had a Catholic secondary school with an impressive radio telescope. I wish I had had the time to explore the heavens in a scientific sense. The vastness and variety of the universe is simply astounding, wondrous beyond words. I suspect that one reason why some do not believe in God is that it boggles *the imagination* how one Being could create

and sustain such a universe. It is so hard to *imagine*. Many assume that this universe is all that there is, and there is a constant search for possible life in our own and in other galaxies. Speculation has long been rife over unidentified flying objects, and claims have been made of the presence of other human-like creatures elsewhere. With due respect for those of an opposite opinion, my hunch is that there is no intelligent life elsewhere in the universe — meaning by this, persons with intellect, free will and conscience like ourselves. I strongly suspect that planet Earth is a unique jewel in the entire visible creation, and that there is no other planet with such an extraordinary set of circumstances so favourable to life and civilization. My suspicion is that our ever-changing universe is like a vast womb that has formed, protected, nourished and produces the stunning phenomenon that is planet Earth, our earthly home. The old idea that the earth was the centre of the universe has long been justifiably rejected. But in another sense, I believe that it is its true centre, in the sense that the “eye” of the universe is our own planet Earth. The Creator

has formed our home and continues to do so, with an immense array of tools, and the powerful telescopes of the world peer out at his seemingly unending workshop. God has given to mankind an extraordinary, and perhaps unique, home. But — and this is my real point here — it is just a sign of what is to come, something far more awesome, beautiful and joy-filling. I refer to the unseen world existing now beyond our sight. I refer to Heaven, the realm of God and his angels and saints, and to Hell, the abode of the damned.

The fact is that however captivating our universe is, and in particular planet Earth its heart and our home, it is not to be compared with the unseen world. In the unseen world there is, first and foremost, the great Being that transcends all else, visible and invisible. God! God — Father, Son and Spirit! From all eternity, the divine Being has lived in an unutterable embrace of happiness, joy and love — Father, Son and Spirit, each of whom is this one ineffable Being. The beauty and greatness of our world is a mere shadow of the beauty and infinity of its Creator, and

our destiny is to see him face to face forever. There are so many who do now see him — first and foremost Jesus Christ our Brother and our God, but also his most holy mother and those who are in him, all the unseen Angels and Saints. The unseen world teems with holiness and joy, and is hard at work to ensure that all of us, God's children who are blessed with the gift of this brief life on this extraordinary planet, will be received into his presence in the realm of the unseen. How terrible to miss out on this! This world is not all that there is, despite its extraordinary spectacle. It is a tragic mistake to think otherwise. The unseen world is far, far greater, greater beyond imagining, and it can be lost forever. There is the unseen Hell, a horrible thought and a horrible reality, dark, hate-filled, cavernous, populated with despicable beings that seek without respite to do harm to God and his interests. How terrible to fall into the depths of Hell and to spend one's eternity in such an abysmal company. Heaven is the whole point of our sojourn on this beautiful scene which is ours. We have been given a beautiful home, challenging and full

of hazards, but beautiful nevertheless. Its point is to give us the opportunity of making a choice. Do I wish to serve God, or do I wish to go my own way? I must serve him! As our Lord says in our Gospel today, *“It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out”* (Mark 9:41-50). The ultimate issues are clear and stark.

Mankind’s future turns on the question of sin. If man sins, he is on the road to Hell. If he turns away from sin whatever be the cost, and if he keeps turning away from sin whenever he does sin, he is on the road to God and to Heaven. The greatest reality is unseen. It is more vast, more enduring, more dramatic, far more beautiful. Let us live in view of it, using our world in such a way that we attain our true homeland with God, for eventually this world as we see it will pass away to something new. Then God will be all in all. Let us renounce sin, then, and live for God. He is our joy and the cause of our flourishing.

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Second reflection:

On our image of God

There are so many illusions and excuses that can lead us into sin, or that can delay our repentance. The Old Testament book of Sirach gives us some of them. One in particular (ch. 5:6) is perhaps especially worth noticing, for it is one we in our day are prone to succumb to. It relates to our image of God. Sirach tells us “*Do not say, ‘His compassion is great, he will forgive my many sins;’ for with Him are both mercy and wrath, and his rage bears heavy on sinners*” (5:6). God has revealed himself to be a God of love and mercy. St Thomas Aquinas writes somewhere that God reveals or manifests his power in his mercy. However, Cardinal Newman used to insist that we in our day are prone to think that God is merciful and compassionate in the sense that he will benevolently overlook sin. This is because we tend to think that sin does not matter much. This in turn relates to the modern tendency to think that truth is relative, and that there is no such thing as ultimate and absolute truth.

This tendency, the tendency of modern relativism, is something Pope Benedict XVI had been commenting on even before his election. Relativism is so widespread and strong that he considered it to be a dictatorship. Such assumptions (as relativism) affect our image of God and his holiness, and can lead us to forget the urgency of repentance. Let us not delay our repentance, for we ought repent daily, making a full return to the Lord.



Friday of the seventh week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 13 (12):6 O Lord, I trust in your merciful love. My heart will rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord who has been bountiful with me.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that, always pondering spiritual things, we may carry out in both word and deed that which is pleasing to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: James 5:9-12; Psalm 102; Mark 10:1-12

Jesus then left that place and went into the region of Judea and across the Jordan. Again crowds of people came to him, and as was his custom, he taught them. Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife? What did Moses command you? he replied. They said, Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away. It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law, Jesus

replied. But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female'. 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate. When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. He answered, Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery. (Mark 10:1-12)

Christ on marriage If we set Christ's teaching against the backdrop of the teachings of most religions, such as Judaism, Islam, most indigenous religions, and indeed many Christian denominations, his teaching on the indissolubility of marriage stands out as most noteworthy. The context of our Lord's remarks in today's Gospel is the question asked by the Pharisees, "*Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?*" We read in chapters 22, 23, and 24 of the Book of Deuteronomy various prescriptions governing

marriage in Jewish society at that earlier time, including (in Deuteronomy 24: 1-4) rules on divorce. It was these directives of Deuteronomy 24 to which the Pharisees were alluding in their question. Those directives of the Mosaic Law allowed for divorce. But of course there were an abundance of directives in the Pentateuch, especially in the Books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. The status of these rules varied: the Ten Commandments of Exodus represented something much more serious and authoritative than, say, the directive not to permit the corpse of a criminal to hang from a tree overnight (Deuteronomy 21: 23). What, then, was to be said of the Mosaic directives authorizing a man to write out a bill of divorce and to dismiss his wife from his house? Our Lord gave his answer: the Mosaic admission of divorce and remarriage was a purely disciplinary measure of the time, designed to limit the damage on marriage, society's most fundamental institution. But, our Lord said to them, it did not reflect the mind and plan of God as he had revealed in the beginning. He then refers to the two inspired accounts of the origins of

man and the world in the Book of Genesis. In chapter 1, the first account, we read that “*God created man in his own image ... male and female he created them*” (1:27). This is followed by a second account, in which is given a more picturesque description of the creation of man (2: 18-23). Then our Lord quotes the binding implication of all this, as it appears in the second account: “*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh*” (2: 24). Having quoted from Genesis, Christ then gives his own teaching: “*So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.*”

So Mark quotes our Lord’s clear teaching that once a couple truly become man and wife, their union is God’s work, and neither party may undo it and enter into another union. Such is God’s act and intention, and we have, as St Paul will make clear, an image and symbol of this in the relation between Christ and his Church. Indeed, Christian marriage has been constituted as a share in this union of Christ and his Church. In St Luke’s Gospel, Christ asserts

that: “*Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery*” (Lk 16:18). Both of these teachings agree with what is probably the earlier statement of St Paul in 1 Corinthians, “*To the married I give this command — not I but the Lord — that the wife should not separate from her husband...and that the husband should not divorce his wife*” (1 Corinthians 7:10). But suddenly we notice in the Gospel of St Matthew — a Gospel especially concerned for Jewish converts to the faith — what seems like an exception. In Matthew 5: 32, the exception our Lord allows is the “matter of *porneia*.” In Matthew 19:9, again the exception is “*porneia*.” What is this “*porneia*”? The word appears in two other places in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 5: 1, the “*porneia*” which St Paul condemns is a case of one having his father’s wife. The man married his stepmother — a case of “*porneia*” “*not found even among the pagans.*” Of course, such sexual immorality (“*porneia*”) had to be terminated. The second example of “*porneia*” is that in Acts 15: 20 and

29 — commonly translated simply as “fornication.” The Council of Jerusalem directs that converts abstain from food offered to idols, from eating blood and strangled animals, and from “*porneia*.” But “*porneia*” here could not simply mean “fornication.” It hardly needed to be said that converts must absolutely abstain from *fornication*! It seems to mean some type of sexual relationship which violated the Jewish law on marriage. “*Porneia*” would mean, say, an illegal marriage according to Jewish law. Converts such as these who were now separating would not be “divorcing” and so incurring Jesus’ disapproval. In this understanding of the matter, “*porneia*” was a sexual relationship which could not be regarded as a true and proper “marriage.” It had no validity, and so their “divorce” would not be a divorce in the sight of God.

However, the point to be taken from our Gospel passage today (Mark 10:1-12) is above all Christ’s teaching on the sacredness of marriage. It is *God’s* doing, *his* plan. Scripture shows that its archetype is the union between Yahweh God and his chosen people, and more definitively,

the union between Christ and his Church. That is the model for every Christian marriage, and, most important of all, every Christian marriage is a Sacrament. It throbs with the life of God and with the love which flows between Christ and his Church. A Christian marriage is, therefore, a privileged locale of Christ's presence in the Church and the world. Let every Christian couple be conscious of their special vocation, then, to be an instrument of Christ's presence and action in the world.

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Second reflection: (Mark 10:1-12)

Christ and the natural law I have heard it said that the recognized basis of the prosecutions for crimes against humanity carried out at the Nuremberg trials at the end of World War II was the *natural law*. It was recognised that nature manifested inviolable moral laws to the moral perception of man. Our Lord in our Gospel passage today (Mark 10:1-12) is telling us of one of these natural laws. It is the law that marriage involves an

unbreakable union between a man and a woman. This unbreakable union, our Lord tells us, is founded on their very being as male and female. *“From the very beginning of creation God made them male and female. This is why a man must leave father and mother and the two become one body.”* It is clear that our Lord is saying that Scripture reveals there to be a natural law which man perceives as imposed on him in view of the natural constitution of the human couple who are married, and its manifest meaning. But to see this (and probably some other natural laws) may well require the light of Christ. After all, the moral obligations of marriage have ever been controverted.

It is Christ himself who in this instance reveals the natural law of marriage, and without his light we may not perceive it. Let us resolve to fill our minds with the light of Christ as it comes to us through the Church his representative, and thus be all the more equipped to perceive the obligations imposed by the natural law.



Saturday of the seventh week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 13 (12):6 O Lord, I trust in your merciful love. My heart will rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord who has been bountiful with me.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that, always pondering spiritual things, we may carry out in both word and deed that which is pleasing to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ecclesiasticus 17:1-13; Psalm 102;
Mark 10:13-16

People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. And he took the children in

his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them. (Mark 10:13-16)

Each child Among the things we can forget in reading the Gospels are the *children* who must have featured therein. In fact, when Jesus Christ was a Child, the greatest person on the face of the earth was a Child. Let us start with that fact. Above those quiet fields just outside Bethlehem, the heavens erupted with glory as the angel of the Lord announced to the shepherds the birth of a Child. They went to see him — a tiny infant wrapped in swaddling clothes, a human baby who was also God himself. Soon after, he was taken into the Temple to be presented before God, and there he was the object of rapt attention by Simeon and Anna. Whenever we think of an infant, we are able to appreciate its grandeur by thinking of the Infant Jesus Christ. He, too, was an Infant. Then he grew in wisdom, stature and age. We read that when he was twelve he was taken by Mary and Joseph up to the Temple in Jerusalem to take part in the feast there. I have read that the rabbinical ruling was that a boy was not

bound to make the journey till the completion of his thirteenth year, but that it was customary for parents to take their child earlier than this. If this was so, we may take it that Christ, in going to Jerusalem at this age, was going precisely as a Child still. The episode is the episode of a Child, and it turned out that as a Child he was a sensation among the Temple authorities in Jerusalem. Mary and Joseph, arriving in Jerusalem with their caravan of friends and relatives — with whom they planned to return — may have left him with them. That they had no qualms about this shows not only our Lord's immersion in the reality of family and village life, but their own utter confidence in him. Let us imagine the Child moving about in the Temple, praying, observing, thinking with rapt adoration of his heavenly Father. Let us imagine this or that teacher of the Law noticing him and speaking to him briefly. Let us imagine word passing among the Temple authorities, and his being pointed out among them as a most fascinating Child. After several days, including the three days during which he was left behind, this Child attracted the

astonished notice of the best minds in the Temple institution and among the Temple aristocracy.

Let us think of this Child whenever we think of children. He is their model. But there is more. Now a Man, Jesus Christ himself noticed children and loved them. In our Gospel today we read that “*people were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them.*” We read elsewhere in the Gospels of people seeking the touch of Jesus Christ. With a touch he raised the dead and healed the sick. Even if they touched him, they were healed — and even if they merely touched his garment. The touch of Jesus was laden with power, and we can imagine how greatly parents with faith would have sought that Jesus Christ touch their children in blessing. They also sought it because they sensed that he loved children. They saw his smile, the lighting up of his eyes and features as he gazed at the infant or child. On the occasion of our Gospel today, it was too much for the disciples who doubtless were concerned over the abundance of work and pressure on their Master. They attempted to send the parents off — but

our Lord intervened at once and commanded them to let the children approach him. He remembered his own childhood, and knew the awesomeness of what lay ahead for them. We read in the Gospel of St Luke (1: 66) that the people said of the child John — John who would become the Baptist — “*what manner of person will this child be?*” Then, significantly, Luke tells us that “*the hand of the Lord was with him.*” As our Lord received each child presented to him by his or her parents, he too may have asked himself, “*what manner of person will this child be?*” The hand of the Lord was with John. Our Lord placed his hands on each of these children. We read that he said to them, “*Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them*” (Mark 10:13-16). Our Lord not only loved and welcomed children; he not only blessed them for their future lives. He held up for our imitation certain features

typical of the child — his openness to the good things offered to him. We must be open to the Kingdom of God offered us by Jesus Christ.

Let us take from our Gospel passage today our Lord's love and concern for children, his bestowing on them his blessings, and his seeing in them an inspiration for his disciples. Let us for our part look on each child as having a wonderful model in the childhood of Jesus Christ, and as having a most loving Friend in him who wishes to bless them for their years ahead. Let us do all we can to bring each child to Jesus Christ for him to bless them.

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Second reflection: (Mark 10:13-16)

Jesus and children It is a commonplace in Christian thought that all things and all persons are to be viewed in the light of Christ. Today's Gospel presents parents bringing their children to Jesus for him to touch them, and our Lord welcomed them. This reminds us that

a most serious responsibility lies on every parent to bring his or her children into contact with the Person of Jesus. This contact will be the source of innumerable blessings. And this does not only concern parents — represented in our Gospel passage by the parents there mentioned — because Our Lord rebuked others who were making this contact difficult. It is those “others” who are also involved, and whom we are reminded of. All who are associated with Jesus and who wish to be his disciples ought be making it easy for each and every child (and parent) to have contact with our Lord.

Let us think of our Lord doing now, what he is described as doing in the Gospel passage — *“he put his arms around them, laid his hands on them and gave them his blessing”*. This is what he wants to do with every child who meets him in prayer, in the sacraments, in the priest, and in the life of the Church. Let us endeavour to make this happen in the life of every child.



Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 18 (17):19-20 The Lord became my protector. He brought me out to a place of freedom; he saved me because he delighted in me.

Collect Grant us, O Lord, we pray, that the course of our world may be directed by your peaceful rule and that your Church may rejoice, untroubled in her devotion. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 49:14-15; Psalm 61;
1 Corinthians 4:1-5; Matthew 6:24-34

Jesus said to his disciples, No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money. Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more

important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. (Matthew 6:24-34)

Divine Providence I remember watching a television interview in which the Prime Minister of Australia at the time made reference to God. He referred to him as “the Creator.” At the time, incidentally, I had the impression that he used that expression as a deft way of avoiding the use of the word, “God” — which is rarely used publicly in secular Australia. Now, in a country of Christian heritage, God is indeed known as the *Creator* — this is his first and foremost title. I suspect, though, that few people ponder on the enormous significance of this divine prerogative, his being the *Creator of all things, seen or unseen*. He is the Creator in that he sustains every aspect of being that is not himself. Intimately connected with his work of sustaining in being, is his work of ongoing direction of what he sustains. In continually sustaining all that is by his act of will, he is at the same time ordering all that is to its good and proper end. There are so many aspects of this which are beyond our understanding. We can scarcely understand how God can create and sustain things out of nothing by a mere act of his loving will. But

so it is. Whatever there is, and whatever happens, is sustained, and ultimately guided, by the loving hand of God from no other resource than his own power. He is the Creator, and therefore the Lord and Guide of all. But this presents an immediate problem, for so much that happens in the world is wrong and evil. A terrible natural disaster occurs — say, an earthquake or a massive flooding or a vast bush fire — that involves a tremendous loss of life and property. Alternatively, it could be the outbreak of a war leading to atrocities and loss of innocent life. The water that floods the towns and washes away property and life, the people who wage war and cause untold suffering to innocent civilians, all are sustained in being by the Creator. God seems to have a hand in the evil, then. In 1994, from April to mid-July, there occurred the mass murder of an estimated 850,000 people in the small East African nation of Rwanda, wiping out as much as 20% of the country's population. Those who were doing the killing were sustained in existence by the Creator. Why did he not withdraw his creative hand from this? How could allowing

this possibly fit into his all-holy Providence in governing the world?

We cannot possibly answer such questions, if only because the vastness and complexity of the universe is such that we cannot even understand how it could be guided to good ends by any hand. But let us consider the Providence of God from a different perspective — it may help us appreciate the power of God to bring good out of evil. God is our Creator, and he therefore has had each of us in his mind from all eternity. As St Paul writes, *before the world began, God chose us in Christ to be holy and full of love in his sight*. Therefore, from the very foundation of the world God has been working out his plan for the coming into being of each of us. We are in no way the result of chance — we are chosen by him, and have been so chosen from eternity. Consider what this entails. The history of the world is the fruit of a well-nigh infinite number of factors of a seeming chance character. All these elements, in their myriad complexity and seeming incidental character, have contributed to the making of the present. Let each person

ask himself how he came to be, in a purely historical sense. His existence was dependent on the perhaps chance meeting of his parents, and their existence depended on the chance meeting of their parents, together with an incalculable number of factors, all of a very contingent character. The conception and birth of each could easily not have happened. Nothing in such a history was necessary, and it could all have so easily been otherwise. One stray event could have changed the course of generations to come. What difference would there have been to history if, as a boy on the island of Corsica, Napoleon had fallen off some precarious position and been killed? He would never have been heard of, but how different would history have been! Now, let each person think of the vast accumulation of coincidences that have led to his own existence, all the while remembering that he is the result of the guiding Providence of God who knows, chooses and loves him by name. God's plan and choice is worked out amid the incomprehensible complexity of the history of the world. God's providence is almighty.

God has the power to attain his holy ends in and through the creation which he constantly sustains. He has the power to do it, despite the complexity and terrible evils of history. Therefore whatever happens to us, let us remember that all is in the hands of a loving and holy Creator. If he allows it, let us trust him and obey him. From the slightest inconveniences to the greatest, from the best of blessings to the worst of reversals, let us do what our Lord commands us to do in today's Gospel (Matthew 6: 24-34). We must not worry as if there is no God, as if there is no Creator, as if there is no loving Providence, as if God is not in charge. *Do not worry*, our Lord says. *Rather, seek first the kingdom of God and his justice*, and he will provide — and all things are possible for God.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.302-314 (God's providence); 2828-2837 ("Give us this day our daily bread")



Monday of the eighth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 18 (17):19-20 The Lord became my protector. He brought me out to a place of freedom; he saved me because he delighted in me.

Collect Grant us, O Lord, we pray, that the course of our world may be directed by your peaceful rule and that your Church may rejoice, untroubled in her devotion. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Peter 1:3-9; Psalm 110; Mark 10:17-27

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. Good teacher, he asked, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Why do you call me good? Jesus answered. No one is good - except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honour your father and mother.' Teacher, he

declared, all these I have kept since I was a boy. Jesus looked at him and loved him. One thing you lack, he said. Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me. At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, Who then can be saved? Jesus looked at them and said, With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God. (Mark 10:17-27)

The Good If one compares the popular literature and drama of, say, the mid-twentieth century with that of fifty or sixty years later in our own day, there is one difference worth noticing. By “popular literature and drama” I am thinking especially of the fictional characters

in comic-strips, in the easily-procurable popular novels, in the Saturday cinema movies which the average man-in-the-street and young person read or watched at that time. I think of the characters (of the mid-twentieth century) such as Tarzan, Superman, The Phantom, Hopalong Cassidy, and other characters who featured in action adventure series watched or read by the ordinary populace. There was no religion in a formal sense in these characters, but they were morally good and they resisted the evil actions of others — and by “evil actions” I mean actions that harmed others in an obvious way. They were morally good, while being secular in respect to religion. There were two clearly identified moral realms in the world, good and evil. Good was naturally attractive and evil was naturally repulsive, and this often showed itself in the handsome features and manner of the good characters, and in the ugliness of the bad. The broad picture implied that there is a good and an evil, that there is a struggle between the two, that goodness is attainable, and that goodness will, generally speaking, win out in the end.

Now, the characters of popular literature, drama and culture of sixty years later, in the early twenty-first century, do not portray such a straightforward picture of the moral world. Religion is still absent from the scene, but moral goodness is not nearly so obvious. It is not as common as it was for the hero of the adventure to be simply “good,” nor for the good to prevail in the struggle. In the contest between good and evil, often the upshot that results is a miserable stalemate. While in many respects this is a truer reflection of the objective situation in which fallen man finds himself, the unfortunate feature of this picture is its inherent scepticism as to the reality and nature of goodness, and the possibility of its flourishing in the human being. While it is implicitly accepted that moral goodness is desirable and indeed required of man, there is a deep scepticism as to its objective nature and attainability. That is, there is scepticism as to what “goodness” is, and as to the possibility of there being a truly “good man.”

In our Gospel today (Mark 10:17-27), we read of a man who eagerly comes to our Lord seeking the way to life

everlasting. *“As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. Good teacher, he asked, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”* Now, what we notice is our Lord’s immediate response, which might seem to some to be somewhat irrelevant to the man’s question. He picks up immediately not on the question itself, but on the title by which the man addressed him. *“Why do you call me good? Jesus answered. No one is good – except God alone.”* In fact, our Lord’s answer was magnificent, timeless, and especially apt for our own modern secular scepticism as to religion and the moral life. Our Lord immediately directed the attention of the man not to the path to ultimate life, happiness and flourishing, but to its fundamental source. How may I attain eternal life and happiness? First of all, think of the good God. How may I flourish in an ultimate sense? Turn your attention immediately to the one and only inherently, necessarily, and absolutely good Reality, which is God. Our Lord is instantly implying that true happiness is obtained by attaining goodness, and that objective goodness as a

transcendent and necessary reality is found in God alone. If you wish to be happy, seek it in being good. Reject all evil. But “goodness” is to be found only in God who is its ultimate locale and source. The heart of all reality and the object of all striving is the Good, which is God alone. Therefore if you seek life and happiness, then follow the way of God and seek to do his will. It is this which will lead to your true flourishing and happiness. It is God alone who, in an ultimate, objective and necessary sense, is good. It is for him to bestow goodness just as it is for him to bestow existence itself. God is the key to man’s instinctive desire to be good, and to his instinctive sense that he should and must be good. The answer to modern man’s scepticism as to the objective reality and possibility of goodness is given by our Lord: “*No one is good but God alone.*” That is to say, ultimately goodness does exist, and that goodness can be identified. It is God himself.

The gods of polytheism were often far from good, and never were they absolutely good. Classical Rome could not frame its laws on the basis of the goodness and

example of the gods. If anything, reason had to take precedence as the source of their notion of good laws and practice. Revealed religion, and in particular that revelation which was given in the Person and teaching of Jesus Christ, made manifest the God of all goodness. No-one is good but God alone. God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is himself the one God that his Father is, and the Holy Spirit is the same one God. The Good News of the Gospel is that God has entered the world to empower us to be good with a share in his own goodness. Let us follow his commandments to the end. It will make us fit for life everlasting.

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Second reflection: (Mark 10:17-27)

Loving Christ without reserve The story of the rich young man is a very sad one. *Jesus looked steadily at him and loved him.* Imagine that! Imagine being the object

of the special love and gaze of Jesus and being invited to make him, Jesus, the object of one's life. This was a wonderful privilege offered to a good and generous young man. But he turned it down because he preferred his own possessions. Our Lord has chosen each of us — God has chosen each of us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and full of love in his sight. Christ has looked on each of us and loved us and has asked us to follow him unreservedly according to the particular vocation he has given us. The danger is that we shall follow our Lord, but with reservations. We will reserve to ourselves certain things that prevent us from giving our hearts totally to the Master.

Let us resolve then to make the work of our lives loving God with all our heart, and not just with part of it. Let us begin by praying for the genuine *desire* to do this, and the wisdom to know *how* to do it.



Tuesday of the eighth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 18 (17):19-20 The Lord became my protector. He brought me out to a place of freedom; he saved me because he delighted in me.

Collect Grant us, O Lord, we pray, that the course of our world may be directed by your peaceful rule and that your Church may rejoice, untroubled in her devotion. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Peter 1:10-16; Psalm 97; Mark 10:28-31

Peter said to Jesus, We have left everything to follow you! I tell you the truth, Jesus replied, no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields- and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life.

But many who are first will be last, and the last first.
(Mark 10:28-31)

Moral but not religious? Perhaps the greatest nineteenth-century account of the history of one man's religious opinions is that contained in Newman's *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (1864). The very title of his book has become a standard phrase for any man's "Apologia." In it Newman gives the story of his passing from an Evangelical-like beginning of religious convictions on to his eventual entry into the Catholic Church. He experienced his first religious conversion at the age of fifteen, and we read that the previous year, when he was fourteen, he read with a certain curiosity and pleasure some of the anti-Christian writings of Paine, Hume and Voltaire (*Apologia*, p.3). We gain a further insight into his attitude at this point from a note he wrote in his "Early Journals" (Book I, p.,169), on January 19, 1823. In that note he writes, "*I recollect (in 1815 I believe) thinking I should like to be virtuous, but not religious. There was something in the latter idea I did not like. Nor did I see the meaning of loving God.*" I mention

this statement as an instance of the break between morality and religion that has been so characteristic of modern Western thought. Morality is allowed as essential, while religion is an extra, and indeed often questionable. I remember years ago watching an episode of the television series entitled “Cold Warrior.” I think it was showing in the early or mid-1980s. The principal hero of the series was an accomplished espionage and crime fighter, and in one episode he was asked if he believed in God. He answered that he believed in a higher Power. It was, we might say, old-time deism dressed up in a more modern language. By such a reply one is saved from being an “atheist” while carrying no baggage of religious dogma. There is little personal religion because the “higher Power” has scarcely anything to do with one’s practical life. For that character (the Cold Warrior), the important thing was to be moral, to fight against crime and social wrongdoing, and religion as such was, well, a mere extra. Basically, this is the public position of modern culture and society. Religion is a purely private persuasion. The important

thing is that each citizen conform to public morality. A “good person” need not at all be a religious person.

One of the serious problems of this position is that the scope of being “moral” or “good” is not made clear. Morality without religion almost invariably means a very restricted morality. It usually consists of that morality which is approved by society, or which the natural reason of man approves. The point of my mentioning this here is not to begin an analysis of the widespread notion that what matters is morality and not religion. Rather, it is to contrast this with the alternative notion of morality profoundly *connected* with religion. Of course, there is a sense in which religion is to be judged by the fundamental principles of morality. A religion which is manifestly immoral — which approves, for instance, of suicide bombings or other immoral perversions — cannot be allowed as authentic and having to do with the divine. But in revealed religion, God has everything to do with morality. He demands a moral and holy life. The Ten Commandments may be regarded as including, in a simple

summary, the great principles of the natural law. If anyone is to have any part with the God of Revelation, that same God requires of him that he lead a good life. *Be holy*, God says in the Old Testament, *for I am holy* (Leviticus 11: 44). The heart of the moral life to which the God of revelation calls each man and woman is a personal love for Him as their Lord and God. The principal and abiding inspiration for the good life is a love for the all-holy God of Revelation. God sees all. He is ever-present to man and to all things. There is not a single thought, not a single word, nor a single action, which does not stand in the full light of the gaze of the all-holy One. While society sees a little of what we do or say, and while reason can deduce many elements of our duty (while being easily subject to a perverted will), God is subject to no-one, and as our Judge he observes all our thoughts, words and deeds. What greater incentive to a total morality, to a morality that reaches every nook and cranny of our inner being, could there be than this? This brings us to our Gospel today (Mark 10:28-31), in which Peter, speaking on behalf of the

disciples, professes his having left all to follow Jesus Christ. The love of Jesus Christ is the heart and soul of all the Christian does — his entire moral life.

Christ totally approves of this. The man who leaves all to follow him will receive everything back in a higher and better way. That is to say, if the moral life is the path to happiness, it is truer to say that the following of Jesus Christ as the foundation of the moral life is the path to happiness. The love of Jesus Christ inspires us to seek holiness — which is to say, to seek to be like Jesus our Master. This is much more demanding and of a higher standard than ordinary morality, and we have in Christ an example and a love that will lead us on to those heights. But more important than all, we have the gift of the Holy Spirit to make it all possible. The truly good man, the thoroughly moral man, is the one moulded in the likeness of Jesus Christ by grace and by his love.



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Scripture today: Ecclesiasticus 36:1-2.5-6.13-19; Psalm 78;
Mark 10:32-45

The disciples were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. We are going up to Jerusalem, he said, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of

the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise. Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. Teacher, they said, we want you to do for us whatever we ask. What do you want me to do for you? he asked. They replied, Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory. You don't know what you are asking, Jesus said. Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with? We can, they answered. Jesus said to them, You will drink the cup I drink and be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared. When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. Jesus called them together and said, You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and

whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:32-45)

Love One of the most pervasive features of the universe is attraction. Setting man aside for the moment, we see “attraction” everywhere. Mere gravity is an obvious manifestation of the presence and the force of attraction that pervades even the purely physical world. Down to the tiniest elements of the atom and the neutron, there is present the force of attraction. The physical universe is held together by laws of physical and chemical attraction, and as we ascend the order of visible creation this pattern of “attraction” of one to the other grows in richness accordingly. Within species of plant, insect, fish, animal, there is the law of mutual attraction — together, of course, with a law of attack. What drives this attraction is unreflecting instinct: it has to happen. There is no choice. All are driven by the instinct of attraction — and an opposite instinct of attack. While the purpose of this pattern of “attraction” (and attack) is self-preservation, it

reflects in its own way the higher activity present in the crown of visible creation, which is man. That higher activity is love. Love is nobler far than mere “attraction.” One of the greatest things in the universe, and one of the noblest things extolled in literature of all kinds, is human love. Love is not mere instinct or chemical and physical attraction for the sake of the subject itself — which is the essence of “attraction” in the orders of creation lower than man. Love takes the subject beyond himself to the other and affirms and serves the other for his own sake. It leaves the Self behind and gives itself to the other for the other’s sake. Love is the highest activity in the universe, going far beyond mere physical and instinctive attraction which pervades and preserves the world. We may say that love is the highest tip of the mountain, a tip that almost touches the heavens. It is what most approaches the life of the God beyond the clouds. In fact, true human love is the stamp of God on creation, which is the work of his hands. It is his imprint on the things he has made, the calling and the law which he has implanted in the heart of man, who is made in

his image. The law of “attraction” driving the rest of creation points to and reflects the higher law of “love” which man is called to obey, and in which he finds his true happiness.

But we notice that while love takes the subject out of himself into the other, the two thus united in love do not merely rest in one another. They, united in love, go beyond themselves to some further good. In the married couple, it is the child or the children, or some other persons in need, who also become the object of the love of husband and wife — united as they are in love for one another. Indeed, precisely as given over to the love and service of some further good, does their love for one another grow deeper. The married couple, giving themselves in love to their children, grow even further in their loving union with one another. Love always takes the subject beyond himself, and when two are united in love, this loving union takes them beyond themselves to a further good, which unites them one to the other even further. I say all this as a general philosophical context for our Gospel today. In our

Gospel scene we contemplate the Son of God made man setting resolutely on his course towards his Passion and Death — it will be the means by which he will redeem the world. He has about him the Twelve, whom he has invited to be with him as his companions and sharers in his mission. In the first instance, they are to be his companions. They have the calling to friendship with him — to be in love with the Master. Their whole life, as will be the life of the Christian, is to consist in friendship with Jesus Christ, ardent friendship, perfect friendship. Moral perfection will consist in the perfection of their friendship with him. But this will mean being united with him in his mission for the world. Their friendship with him will take them out of themselves into the heart of Jesus Christ, and, united with him, both he and them, in union, will give themselves for the salvation of the world. He is the Saviour, they share in his saving blessings and in union with him bring those blessings to mankind. That is the calling of Christ's Church and of every member of it. Love for Jesus Christ does not mean simply sitting down

watching the face of the Master and contemplating him with love. It is indeed this, in the first instance — being his companion. But it also means being up and doing with him — for he himself is ever up and doing in order to save souls.

By our baptism we share in the life of Christ. We are called to be his companions, and to be sent out by him with a share in his redemptive mission. This we prosecute in the ordinary duties of our daily life at home and in the world. This is the love of Jesus Christ, and it is the greatest thing in the world. There is nothing more wonderful on this earth than the Christian saint. He is the exemplification of the noblest thing in our world, which is love — but it is the highest love, the love of Jesus Christ. It is this which is the tip of the mountain that pierces the clouds, and which contains the imprint of the hand of God. Let us seek the perfection of Christian love, then!

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Second reflection: (Mark 10:32-45)

The path to glory

Our Gospel of today presents us with the contrast of what our Lord was expecting and what his disciples were expecting. Our Lord was steadily making his way to Jerusalem where he would bear witness to the truth about himself and suffer unto death as a result. He instructed his disciples accordingly: *“Now we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man is about to be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes. They will condemn him to death.”* Our Lord was returning to the Father to share his glory, but he must pass through his ordeal. By contrast, the disciples were thinking just of the glory. And so James and John asked him: *“Allow us to sit one at your right hand and the other at your left in your glory.”* They did not know that it was necessary to drink first the cup that Jesus had to drink. The other disciples were indignant with the two brothers because it seemed that they were seeking to gain an advantage over them in terms of glory. They, too, had no idea that it was necessary to drink first of the cup.

Let us pray for the grace to appreciate that, paradoxically, suffering is the means to glory and happiness, if we suffer in union with Christ and with his dispositions. The Old Testament book of Sirach tells us that if we aspire to serve the Lord, we must prepare ourselves for an ordeal. Our Lord is man's Exemplar of this. Let us think all through life of the glory that is coming and which will be ours. But let us keep before us equally that the cross provides the path to this glory.



Thursday of the eighth week in Ordinary Time

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Collect Grant us, O Lord, we pray, that the course of our world may be directed by your peaceful rule and that your Church may rejoice, untroubled in her devotion. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Peter 2:2-5.9-12; Ps. 99; Mark 10:46-52

As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving Jericho, a blind man, Bar Timaeus (that is, the Son of Timaeus), was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me! Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, Son of David, have mercy on me! Jesus

stopped and said, Call him. So they called to the blind man, Take courage! Jesus is calling you. Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. What do you want me to do for you? Jesus asked him. The blind man said, Master, I want to see. Go, said Jesus, your faith has healed you. Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road. (Mark 10:46-52)

The gaze of Christ Imagine our Gospel scene today, and in particular the forgotten, neglected and hopelessly-situated blind man who was sitting by the roadside begging. There he sat, perhaps day after day by the roadside on the periphery of Jericho, begging from those who were entering or leaving the ancient town. This entry and exit was probably the most strategic point to catch the attention of those who might help him with their contributions. Perhaps few gave him much thought beyond a passing contribution, and there he was in his darkness with little to live for and nothing much to contemplate except his sufferings. I suspect that he had few if any of family to assist him — for he is there alone, fending for

himself. He obviously had heard of Jesus, but he had no-one to take him to the powerful and holy prophet of so many miracles. Suddenly he heard a concourse of people approaching. He picked up that it was Jesus, Jesus the prophet of Nazareth, whom all knew to be a son of David — and whom many counted as being the *predicted* Son of David. The beggar's whole being sprang into action and nothing could stop him, shouting at the top of his voice with piercing volume — so much so as to attract the irritated rebukes of many in the crowd. He was calling for Jesus, and he called and he called. He considered no-one and nothing in his attempt to gain the attention of the great prophet whom he knew was not only powerful before God, but so very kind and compassionate to those in need. His anxious shouts travelled across the heads of the concourse and reached the ears of Jesus, who thereupon stopped. On another occasion when our Lord was proceeding in the midst of a pressing crowd, a woman quietly and secretly grasped the edge of his garment — and then withdrew back into the crowd. But Jesus immediately stopped. The

whole mass came to its halt, and Jesus looked about searchingly till the woman came forward. In our Gospel today, as soon as the blind man's voice reached Jesus he stopped. Again and again the man's voice continued to be heard — and Jesus asked that he be brought to him. Within minutes the man, in all his profound darkness, was before Jesus, his only hope.

Imagine the blind man, with his face directed to the holy person whose voice penetrated to his depths. “*What do you want me to do for you? Jesus asked him. The blind man said, Master, I want to see. Go, said Jesus, your faith has healed you.*” We read that immediately — “*immediately*” — he received his sight. So in one instant the blind man was sunk in darkness. The very next instant he was gazing at the face of Jesus Christ. Imagine the face of Jesus Christ! Imagine that sacred face, the face of God become man, the face of the One who said, *he who sees me sees the Father!* Imagine this holy face gazing with profound love on the blind man, now seeing with a splendid physical vision. When Christ changed the water

into wine, the steward judged it to be the best wine. He complained to the bridegroom that he had kept the best wine till last. We may imagine the sight that the blind man received to have been truly excellent and perfect sight. He probably now saw with better physical vision than anybody else in the crowd, and his first sight, never to be forgotten, was the face of Jesus Christ. That face must have won his entire soul because we read that thereupon *he followed Jesus along the road*. The face of Jesus Christ, so holy, so powerful, so loving, filled his heart and left its indelible impression. The blind man never forgot it. The fact that his *name* is mentioned probably indicates that he was well-known in the infant Church, or at least among those for whom Mark wrote his Gospel. Towards the end of his Gospel, Mark mentioned another who had a meeting with Jesus Christ. It occurred as our Lord was being dragged out of Jerusalem, carrying his own cross on the way to Calvary. His name was *Simon* from the city of Cyrene, and he was “passing by” — perhaps a brief bystander gazing on the sad scene. He was conscripted into carrying the cross

for the condemned Man. But that changed his life, as we can conclude from the fact that Mark gives us not only the name of this unknown stranger from Cyrene, but the names of his sons Rufus and Alexander (Mark 15:21). What might have changed his life? I strongly suspect it was the holy gaze of the battered, condemned Man next to him.

What each of us must do is become more and more aware of the gaze of Jesus Christ upon us. Christ, God and man, our Redeemer and our Brother, is gazing at us with the same love and power with which he gazed on the blind man, Bar-Timaeus. That gaze was the first and fundamental thing in the new life of that fortunate man — fortunate because he discovered his Lord and Saviour, and had the grace to follow him along the road. Let us base our lives on the loving gaze of Jesus Christ, on our conviction of his love. Let us allow that gaze, ever so real even if unseen, to penetrate the depths of our souls and be the foundation of our lives.

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Second reflection: (Mark 10:46-52)

The gift of Faith The blind beggar received his sight (Mark 10:46-52) because he had faith in Jesus. We know this because our Lord told him so. That it was a genuine faith is evident because, having received his sight, he followed Jesus along the road. It was a faith that led to the following of Jesus Christ. His name is even given — Bar-Timaeus — suggesting that he was known in the Christian community, like Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. How did Bar-Timaeus receive this precious gift of faith? We are not told. He was a blind beggar, but despite his being a no-body in his society, he received this gift from God. On another occasion Our Lord praised a centurion for his faith, saying that he had not seen its like in Israel. This implies that the gift of faith can be given to anyone in any circumstances.

We ought be grateful that we have received the gift and treasure it accordingly. We ought also have a constant optimism in respect to what is possible for others,

encouraging us to bear witness to Jesus in our daily lives,
knowing that God can use our witness to help anyone attain
faith, if he so chooses.



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Scripture today: 1 Peter 4:7-13; Psalm 95; Mark 11:11-26

Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve. The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the

tree, May no one ever eat fruit from you again. And his disciples heard him say it. On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry things through the temple. And as he taught them, he said, Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers'. The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching. When evening came, they went out of the city. In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered! Have faith in God, Jesus answered. I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you,

whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.
(Mark 11: 11-26)

Reverence The Temple of Jerusalem was the spiritual heart of the nation — quite apart from its architectural renown as a religious building in the ancient world. To it went a continuous stream of pilgrims and worshipers. We read in the Gospel of St Luke that when Mary and Joseph, carrying the child Jesus, went to the Temple, they were met by Anna the prophetess who spent her days and nights in the Temple fasting and praying. The nation loved the Temple, and of course Jesus Christ loved the Temple more than anyone else. God dwelt among his chosen people, but in an altogether special way did he dwell in the Temple of Jerusalem — Christ said that it was his Father's House. We read in our Gospel passage today that on our Lord's entry into Jerusalem, he went into the Temple — this was his first stop on entering the City.

With what love did he visit the Temple of Jerusalem, and with what emotion and depth did he commune with his heavenly Father when there! How sacred an abode he knew the Temple to be, and with what disgust must he have viewed all forms of disrespect and profanation in it — and abuses had crept in. There were various zones of the Temple used for different purposes. For instance, Gentiles could pray in its outer court, but were not permitted to enter. There is actually a Greek language inscription from Herod's Temple, of late 1st century BC, warning Gentiles to refrain from entering the Temple enclosure, on pain of death. Sacrificial animals were sold in the outer court as a service to pilgrims. We read in the Gospel of St Luke that Mary and Joseph went to Jerusalem to present the Child Jesus to the Lord and also to offer a sacrifice of a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons. Perhaps they bought these in the outer precincts. In the Gospel accounts of Christ's cleansing of the Temple, Jesus addresses those selling pigeons there. There was also the facility to

exchange foreign coins for local currency to pay the Temple tax and other purposes. This too is mentioned.

As a matter of fact, Christ was appalled at the situation. In our Gospel passage today (Mark 11: 11-26), we read that our Lord “*entered the Temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple*”. This was “in” the Temple. It suggests to me that the business of buying and selling sacrificial animals and exchanging money had encroached beyond the outer courts (permitted to Gentiles) into the Temple proper. We also read that Jesus “*would not allow anyone to carry things through the Temple*” — suggesting that “things” that related to this Temple trade were being carried “through” the Temple, or at least things that should not have been transported through the Temple anyway. In any case, the *sacredness* of the area was forgotten, and Christ determined to put an end to this forthwith. It manifested a neglect by the Temple authorities, and perhaps a certain greed on their part, a desire that the sacrifice-purchasing and money-changing be profitable and in very good shape.

Within a short space of time — let us say, twenty minutes or so, amid shouts and noise, scurrying of animals and cages, the whiz of Christ's whip, the clattering and rolling of money and the loud thud of tables and benches being tossed asunder, the scene was transformed. Our Lord's clear, stentorian and resounding voice electrified the scene and drove all before him. Animals, birds, money and personnel with their furniture were bundled breathless and confused out into the open air, leaving the Temple quiet. The power of Christ's leadership was irresistible. He was brimful of love for his heavenly Father, and indignant at the honour of God being thus forgotten. St Mark has our Lord doing this at the end of his public ministry, after he enters Jerusalem for the last time — and he is presented as then teaching at length in the Temple. Perhaps his cleansing of the Temple was one of the precipitating factors leading to his final arrest. However, St John in his Gospel presents our Lord cleansing the Temple at the start of his public ministry. This could have been just John's method of arranging the event, but it may indicate that at

both the beginning and at the end of his ministry he performed this striking gesture, so full of symbolism.

Let us contemplate our Lord as Master of the Temple, just as he was Master of the Sabbath, indeed, just as he is Master of all things, seen and unseen. On rising from the dead he told his disciples that all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to him. It is the will of Jesus Christ that we cultivate a profound reverence in all our prayer, including whenever we are in God's sacred precincts. Let us enter our churches with something of the reverence of Jesus Christ, remembering the indignation which irreverence before God his Father aroused in him.

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Second reflection: (Mark 11:11-26)

The Christ of strength Every scene of the Gospel presents us with a facet of the figure of Jesus. In our Gospel today we see Jesus in his power, Jesus in his strength. He condemns the fig tree to barrenness, as a sign

of the condemnation by God of those who are unfaithful. He drives out those who were demeaning the Temple with their selling and buying, and he commands the admiration of the people by his teaching. It is proverbial that people admire and wish to see in their leaders *strength*. But of course they do not want to see *just* strength. They want to see it combined with goodness and all the other qualities that are necessary if good is to prevail. All of this we know we have in the Person of Jesus to a perfect degree. Our Lord is absolutely and utterly admirable, and he lives with us now. He is ever near, to aid us always.

Let us lean on Christ the good and strong One, who by his strength is able to lead us gradually to goodness and holiness. If there is one thing the human person who knows his real condition will appreciate, it is that he is weak. He needs the help of One who is good and strong. This One is God, and the fullness of the godhead dwells bodily in Jesus. Let us then depend on Jesus constantly.



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Scripture today: Jude 17.20-25; Psalm 62; Mark 11:27-33

Jesus and his disciples arrived again in Jerusalem, and while Jesus was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him. By what authority are you doing these things? they asked. And who gave you authority to do this? Jesus replied, I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism-

was it from heaven, or from men? Tell me! They discussed it among themselves and said, If we say, 'From heaven', he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'From men' — they feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet. So they answered Jesus, We don't know. Jesus said, Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. (Mark 11: 27-33)

Life's guide A fundamental question to be considered in life, and one that is very often neglected, is, what *is* my guide through life — and importantly, what *should* be my guide? In my everyday life, what am I relying on to find my way through life's problems and issues? This of course raises the question of what are the important issues of life, but setting that aside for the moment, what is it that I rely on? Of course, from day to day I rely on a variety of things. To a fair extent my own private judgment is my guide. I must make a decision as to whether I ought apply for a particular job, and after taking some advice, I rely on my own best lights and apply for the job. Perhaps my reliance on my own judgment was

ill-advised, but so be it — that is one of the things I rely on. I rely on the good will and judgment of those around me, and accordingly, I rely on their advice and help. I ring up to book a seat on the train, and I rely on the sense of responsibility and competence of the person making the bookings. If I get to the railway station and discover that no booking has been made and that in fact I am unable to get on the train at all because it is packed out, I have been let down in what I relied on. If I am a tourist in a foreign country, I find I have to rely on the chance meetings with this or that person in the matter of how to get to various places. If I am given ill-informed guidance, it leads to great inconvenience. Most people naturally and almost without thinking, depend on a variety of guides. But of course, life is more than going for a job, or booking a train, or finding the right way to get somewhere. There is the fundamental question of how to become the person I can and should be. There is the question of how to *become good*. There is the question of doing the right and moral thing — whatever this means in terms of personal

convenience. There is the question of death, and of dying well. There is the question of life hereafter. These are questions of philosophy and religion. In such matters many rely on the modicum of guidance they have received over the years, without considering carefully whether it was good enough, or even correct at all. So then, what is the authority that I am depending on to guide me through life, especially in basic matters of religion?

There are many who do not care about religion, nor about what others call the ultimate questions. Their interests are immediate, or at least earthly. There are those who, when they care to think about it, dismiss the Hereafter as a figment of the imagination. This life is all that there is, and beyond it there is only the grave. Any consideration of the Hereafter is a waste of time. But this is not typical of man — what is more usual is that, while he accepts the Hereafter, he does not bother to think much of it. So the question of a guide in life that takes him through life to happiness beyond does not arise in his mind. He lives *as if* there is not a Hereafter, or at least *as if* it does not compare

in substance with the present. But this is extremely short-sighted, and is exactly like the man who, in full health, knows there is a future for him, but refuses to think of it. The future will come, and it will leave him profoundly embarrassed. How much more so is it in the matter of the Hereafter. But the issue raised here is, who or what is to be man's *guide*? It comes down to two alternatives. It will come down to reliance on one's private judgment, or reliance on the word of another. This is putting the alternatives in very simple terms, and prescinding from an inevitable degree of overlap one with the other. Of course to a point we all rely on others and to a point we rely on ourselves. To a point both are necessary, but ultimately one or the other predominates. I shall be my own guide, or I shall take another for my guide. In the last analysis, the emphasis will fall on one or the other. In this sense we can say that Man stands at a Junction, and must go forward along one path or the other. But while he stands there, a voice comes from the cloud: *This is my Son, the beloved. Listen to Him!* In this heavenly word it has been revealed

to us that in the final analysis we must depend on a Guide other than ourselves. That Guide has been given to us from Heaven. It is God the Son become Man, Jesus Christ our Brother and our Saviour, the Redeemer of the world. He is our Guide and he it is who takes us securely to our homeland in heaven, the true Hereafter for man.

In our Gospel today (Mark 11: 27-33), the “*chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders came to him. By what authority are you doing these things? they asked. And who gave you authority to do this?*” Jesus Christ has been given all authority in heaven and on earth. There is no authority greater than he. It is curious to note that some of the greatest philosophers and religious founders in the history of mankind have been profoundly mistaken. Jesus Christ is *the Way, the Truth and the Life*. He, as the disciples said to him, knows all things. *No-one comes to the Father but through me*, he said. Let us take him as our Guide, for with him are the words of life.

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Second reflection: (Mark 11:27-33)

The authority of Christ In our Gospel passage today (Mark 11:27-33), the chief priests and scribes challenge our Lord's authority for acting as he did. Cardinal Newman once wrote that authority and obedience are of the essence of religion. It is of the essence of religion that we recognise the authority of God and obey him. But what does this mean in the concrete? After he rose from the dead, our Lord said that all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to him. For that reason his apostles and disciples were to go and make disciples of all the nations, teaching them to observe all that he had commanded them. Obedience to Christ out of love for him is at the foundation of the Christian religion, and this obedience is to pervade our entire life. The Catholic recognises, further, that Christ entrusted to his Church his own authority to bind and to loose, and to use the keys of the kingdom. He accepts the authority of the Church as the concrete expression of the authority of Christ.

Let us then have no part with the mentality of the scribes and priests who challenged and refused Christ his authority. In the concrete, this will mean that we be docile children of the Church our Mother, who teaches in his name.



Ninth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 25 (24):16, 18 Turn to me and have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am alone and poor. See my lowliness and suffering and take away all my sins, my God.

Collect O God, whose providence never fails in its design, keep from us, we humbly beseech you, all that might harm us and grant all that works for our good. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Deuteronomy 11:18, 26-28, 32; Psalm 31:2-4, 17, 25; Romans 3:21-25, 28; Matthew 7:21-27

Jesus said to his disciples: Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly,

'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'
Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash. (Matthew 7:21-27)

Man the saint If we stand back from the world and human society, and gaze on it as an observer, what surely strikes us is the phenomenon of universal activity. Everything is in a state of activity and change. More particularly, each thing seems to be doing something, either reacting to something that bears down upon it, or itself acting on some other thing. The very air we breathe is an agent, as are so many other things, right down to the tiniest neutron. Man, too, is in action. If we speak of a person

“doing nothing,” it is not a compliment. It does not bode well for a person who characteristically does very little. We are made to be up and doing, in some sense. We are made for work and activity — to be achieving goals and being creative. In his innermost being, man senses and feels called to work at things in life, and he will be profoundly dissatisfied if he does very little. But there is something deeper still in man’s being engaged in action, and in being called to action. It is his call to be *good* in his action. While man feels drawn to attain various goals by his activity, he knows that he has the moral obligation to seek *good* goals, and by means of *good* activity. Indeed, this is his fundamental calling. It is constantly required of him by his conscience. He is drawn to be good as something required and beautiful in itself. He is required to be good by the obligatory dictate of his conscience. If he does what his conscience — which is to say his conscientious judgment — tells him is morally wrong, he judges himself to be morally at fault and to that extent evil. It is difficult for him to live with the awareness, imposed

by his conscience, that he is evil. It leaves him fundamentally sad and fearful. He is called to be good — and if at least he is striving to be good, however limited be his success, then to that extent he will experience happiness and contentment of heart. There is this further feature of the awareness that one is obliged to seek moral goodness. While the obligation comes from within man's heart, it does so as if from beyond it. It presents itself as the echo of the voice of an external Obliger. At the heart of man's natural conscience is the echo of God's call that he seek to be good.

This is the situation, looking at it from the perspective of man's inner being. From the very law of his own nature, he is commanded to be good. That natural law — so he senses — reflects the command of One who is beyond him. He will not be happy unless he obeys that law. The great question, of course, is, what does this mean in practical detail — and this is where there can be so much confusion. The instinctive *desire*, or rather the instinctive *obligation*, to be good which springs from within the depths of a man's

heart, has to be — and is — translated into concrete and particular judgements. Thus, let us say in passing, one can distinguish one action of the conscience that commands the good, and another which decides on the practical course which must embody the moral goodness being commanded. Such is man. He is called and commanded by an inner law of his nature to be good, and this has been implanted within him by God. Now, to this natural yearning of man for goodness has come an answer from Heaven. God has entered man's situation and has revealed to him a higher calling still, which will fulfil to perfection the law of his being requiring of him a good life. *Be holy*, the God of Revelation commands, *for I am holy*. How is this holiness to be attained? Holiness is attained through a personal friendship with Jesus Christ, lived out by Christ's own test of this friendship, which is the keeping of his commandments. *If you love me*, he said, *you will keep my commandments*. But the heart of it is a personal friendship with Jesus Christ. It is not the mere living according to a moral standard. In essence the true moral life of man, the

true path to the goodness to which he is called and which is commanded of him, is a genuine friendship with Jesus Christ. This is the rock of his life, the basis referred to in our Gospel today (Matthew 7:21-27). This friendship is based on faith in his Person and his word, but it brings with it the divine aid and a share in the divine life. This grace of God becomes the driving and transforming force empowering the Christian to live the moral life to an excellent degree. By the gift and power of divine grace, he becomes more and more transformed into the image of Jesus Christ in his mind and heart. Friendship with Jesus Christ brings with it the blessing of grace, and this is the divine engine of Christian holiness. The grace of Christ enables man to be a saint.

Natural man feels called and obliged to be good. But his fallen condition makes this extremely difficult. St Paul writes that *all men are under the power of sin*. God has entered the lists on man's behalf, and has given to him the Saviour. The way is now clear, and that way is to know, love and serve Jesus the Saviour as one's personal Friend

and Master. The person who meets and comes to know and love Jesus Christ receives a higher calling which fulfils the one his own nature presents. That calling is Christian sanctity. The baptized Christian is called to be a saint in his everyday life, doing all for love of Jesus, and being moulded anew by grace. Let us turn to Jesus Christ, become his friend, and follow in his footsteps whatever be the cost.



Monday of the ninth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 25 (24):16, 18 Turn to me and have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am alone and poor. See my lowliness and suffering and take away all my sins, my God.

Collect O God, whose providence never fails in its design, keep from us, we humbly beseech you, all that might harm us and grant all that works for our good. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Peter 1:2-7; Psalm 90; Mark 12:1-12

Jesus began to speak to the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders in parables. A man planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a pit for the winepress and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. But they seized him, beat him and sent him

away empty handed. Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed. He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But the tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others. Haven't you read this scripture: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the keystone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes'? Then they looked for a way to arrest him because they knew he had spoken the parable against them. But they were afraid of the crowd; so they left him and went away. (Mark 12:1-12)

Rejection Any reading of history will bring to light some of the great motives of human action. The acquisition of wealth is an obvious motive, as is the

acquisition of power. It is immensely gratifying to own many material resources, and many people have made it their life's business to own a great deal. Some have gone on to use this wealth, whether earned or inherited, in very commendable ways. Katharine Drexel was born in Philadelphia USA in 1858. She was a wealthy girl, and had a grand debut into society, receiving an excellent education and travelling widely. She underwent a religious conversion and went on to use her inheritance to serve the Indians and Coloureds. She is a canonized saint. Others, though, spend their lives simply accumulating wealth. Or again, many have been persons who have aimed for, and gained, great power, and a great trail of human suffering often followed in their wake. Another object of human striving is the good opinion of others — the esteem and admiration of men. It is immensely gratifying to know that one is respected, admired, loved, acclaimed. Let us consider this for a moment. It is obvious that if a person is competent, he will be admired at least for his particular competence. If he has other gifts, he will be respected for

those gifts, and if he has accomplishments to his name, respect will be accorded him for what he has done. But of course, despite a person's abilities, gifts and achievements, recognition may be denied him for a variety of reasons. One reason may simply be the self-centeredness of others. He may get in the way of their own plans and hopes, and so despite his merits he may be opposed and even eliminated. The good person can be the object of injustice and rejection, and if this is the case, he ought at least try to be fairly philosophical about it — remembering that all are afflicted with sin, and this will mean that many are hurt as a result. However, a question may be raised as to whether there is *any pattern in life for good persons*. For instance, allowing for some exceptions, will the good person generally be recognized and accorded the respect that is his due? Further, is there any way of determining whether there will be such a pattern of recognition?

We have an exemplar for all good persons. That exemplar is Jesus Christ. There was one Roman emperor who, I have read, had statues of the various deities and

great persons, and included among them was a statue of Moses, and one of Jesus Christ. Christ was but one of many good people. I remember watching an interview with the Dalai Lama — he regarded Jesus as an instance of the Buddha, in the sense that he incorporated the spirit of the Buddha, just as other great persons in history have. In other words, Christ is but one way to the Father — however “the Father” might be conceived. He is but one of many prophets, as the disciples told our Lord the people thought him to be. But no. The Christian knows that he is the Prophet, the only way to the Father, the One to whom, being the Son, all mankind is to listen. He is indeed the exemplar of man, the One to whom all men are intended by God to direct their attention. He is the Good Man — indeed he is absolutely perfect as man. When Christ told his disciples that they were to seek to be perfect as their heavenly Father was perfect, they had before them the Perfect Man of history. Now, thinking of our earlier question of what pattern (of recognition) can be expected for the good man, we have a key in what was accorded to

Jesus Christ. There never was, and never will be, anyone nearly as good a man as Jesus Christ. He was and is the all-holy God himself and he walked the earth in his humanity. He is still man, and ever shall be. The pattern in his life was that the “important” people attacked, reviled and persecuted him. This is the point of the parable in our Gospel parable today: *“the tenants said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.’ So they took him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard”* (Mark 12:1-12). How great a privilege it would be to meet and gaze upon Jesus Christ! It is life’s goal — eventually to gaze upon him and to be with him forever. But when he walked the earth, he was opposed and reviled. Indeed, he was hated and put to death. This was the pattern of things for the Good Man of history, the all-holy One, the perfect One. If it was so for him, then it must in some sense be expected for the generality of those who are truly good, but especially for those who share in Christ’s goodness through their personal friendship with him. Jesus Christ shows that there

is a mysterious correlation between holiness and being rejected.

The Christian who is truly such, the one who truly follows in the footsteps of the Master, will expect what the Master received — even though this is played out in an almost infinite variety of ways in the real life of those who love the Master. Some saints are accorded great acclaim during life — but look closely, and you will notice that they too share in surprising ways in the opprobrium endured by their Master. Other saints share in it in very obvious ways. Each authentic Christian will share in this mysterious lot, and will count it a privilege to do so. Let us take our stand with Jesus, accepting all that this entails.

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Second reflection:

Love of neighbour There is in the book of Tobit (ch.1), a typical day in the life of the charitable Tobit. He was one of the Jewish exiles living in the pagan land to

which with so many others he had been deported. He is shown carefully observing one of the feast days of the Jewish calendar. He is profoundly charitable, wanting to have a poor Jewish fellow-exile brought to share his good dinner. He is then brought news of another unfortunate Jewish exile who has just been murdered and left in the streets. He immediately rises and goes to help. What comes through in these inspired lines is that anyone who truly lives the religion revealed by God is both deeply religious and deeply *charitable*. He loves God and loves his neighbour.

Our Lord in his teaching confirms this and raises it to a new level by pointing to himself as the fulfilment of the Law, and our model in all that God requires. We are to love one another as Jesus loves us. Our Lord gives us the Holy Spirit to make this possible. Tobit in his way is a type of Christ, Christ who is our daily model, Christ who is our life.



Tuesday of the ninth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 25 (24):16, 18 Turn to me and have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am alone and poor. See my lowliness and suffering and take away all my sins, my God.

Collect O God, whose providence never fails in its design, keep from us, we humbly beseech you, all that might harm us and grant all that works for our good. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Timothy 2:8-15; Ps 24; Mark 12:13-17

Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. They came to him and said, Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we? But Jesus knew their hypocrisy.

Why are you trying to trap me? he asked. Bring me a denarius and let me look at it. They brought the coin, and he asked them, Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription? Caesar's, they replied. Then Jesus said to them, Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. And they were amazed at him. (Mark 12:13-17)

Christ and Caesar

St John the Baptist made a point of appearing before Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee and Perea, to confront him about his immoral life. Specifically, he condemned Herod's divorce of his first wife Phasaelis, the daughter of King Aretas IV of Nabatea, and his remarriage with Herodias, who had formerly been married to his brother Herod Philip I. So the Baptist tried to reclaim the ruler and get him to subject himself to God and his law. Interestingly, we see nothing of this confrontation of a secular ruler in the ministry of our Lord. His public ministry is much more extensive than was that of the Baptist, both in geographical scope and in range of teaching and deeds. But he never approached civil rulers to bring about their reform. I do not mean this as

especially significant in itself — except as, perhaps, indicative of our Lord's aloofness from the political sphere. This wider, and even political, world would come later. When, during his Passion, Jesus was sent by Pontius Pilate to the court of this same Herod, he simply refused to speak with him. Antipas plied him with questions — he wanted to see a miracle. Christ answered him not a word. Our Lord did not deal in any special way with the civil authorities — he certainly made no attempt to bring before the Roman authorities, such as Pilate, his message of the Kingdom with which he was filling Galilee and Judea. When finally brought into the presence of Pilate, he spoke merely of his mission being to bear witness to the Truth. But of his being *himself* the Truth, he said nothing. Christ did not formally proclaim the Gospel to him. *What is Truth?* Pilate asked, and with that question, their conversation ended. Christ generally dealt courteously with civil authorities when they met. He was respectful to Pilate. He readily agreed to go to the house of the Centurion who had asked that he come and heal his

servant. The episode finished with Christ praising highly the faith of that Centurion. But in general, Christ directed his ministry to the House of Israel, and kept somewhat apart from civil and Roman authorities. There were various currents of anti-Roman hostility, and it was a contested point whether the Roman tax ought be paid. Many despised those who obtained jobs from the Romans, such as the tax-collectors. And so it is that in our Gospel today (Mark 12:13-17), our Lord is presented with what was, in the times, a tough question.

The question was, should the people pay taxes to the Romans or not? By paying, they were supporting the pagan and somewhat oppressive Romans — should they be doing this? What was this doing for the exaltation of the true God, the God of the Hebrews? The question was one of general principle. If the question had been much more specific, he may have declined to answer. For instance, on one occasion a man from the crowd asked our Lord to intervene in his case and vindicate him — his brother had appropriated the estate, and he was getting nothing as a

result. Our Lord said to him, “*who appointed me arbitrator in matters such as this?*” and went on then to speak about the dangers of greed. In our case today, our Lord is asked a general question of whether it is allowable to pay taxes to Caesar. His questioners, of course, simply wanted to trap him into uttering words that would create a dangerous political situation for him. But our Lord was more than equal to their cunning. He answered the question immediately and showed that both God and Caesar may and can be obeyed. “*Render to Caesar the things that belong to Caesar, and to God the things that are God’s.*” He did not pronounce on the ultimate legality of Roman control of the Hebrew nation and of the nations falling under its authority. He simply said that, inasmuch as Caesar exercised governance of the Hebrews, he has a right to levy the funds which are needed to fulfil that temporal responsibility. This was as far as he would go during his public ministry. But on rising from the dead, a special commission was given. He told his disciples that *all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to him.*

They were therefore to go to all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the holy Trinity. With that, the situation was now very different. Here there was a universal King, the King of kings and the Lord of lords. It was God's Kingdom established on this earth which, though, was not a temporal kingdom. It was long foretold in the Old Testament, and implicitly foretold in our Lord's own public ministry. Moreover, his disciples were to go to the whole world and make disciples of all the nations. Our Lord said, the "*whole*" world and "*all*" the nations. This included dominions of emperors. All, high and low, were to be invited to become *disciples*. Rome would indeed reach the point of regarding Christ and his Church as a rival empire — one to be put down. But Christ conquered. Many kings and emperors have become Christ's disciples. There is Edward the Confessor of England, King Louis of France, Henry of Germany, Karl of Austria.

The whole world is called to become Christ's disciples, and to welcome Jesus Christ into their hearts and minds. The Church has received the mission — and the

Church means each one of us united to the Church — to help evangelize the world. Each lay person ought exploit his or her daily situation in the world to advance the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ from the highest to the lowest. The lay person has a magnificent mission, to bring Jesus Christ to the heart of the world and to every aspect of its action — right up to the ruler, to Caesar and his equivalent. Let us resolve to do this for love of Jesus Christ.



Wednesday of the ninth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 25 (24):16, 18 Turn to me and have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am alone and poor. See my lowliness and suffering and take away all my sins, my God.

Collect O God, whose providence never fails in its design, keep from us, we humbly beseech you, all that might harm us and grant all that works for our good. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Timothy 1:1-3.6-12; Psalm 122;

Mark 12:18 27

Then the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question. Teacher, they said, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and have children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first one married and died without leaving any

children. The second one married the widow, but he also died, leaving no child. It was the same with the third. In fact, none of the seven left any children. Last of all, the woman died too. At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her? Jesus replied, Are you not in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God? When the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven. Now about the dead rising- have you not read in the book of Moses, in the account of the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken! (Mark 12:18-27)

Resurrection Some people, by natural bent of mind, are inclined to religion and to the acceptance of the reality of the unseen. They tend to think of the unseen realm as being of much greater import than this visible world of our experience. An example of this, if we are to go on his own testimony, was Cardinal Newman, beatified

by Pope Benedict XVI in 2010 and canonised by Pope Francis in October 2019. In his *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (1864) he speaks of his (at times) tending as a child to imagine “*all this world as a deception*” (p.2). He speaks of his “*childish imaginations*” which tended to isolate him “*from the objects which surrounded me, in confirming me in my mistrust of the reality of material phenomena, and making me rest in the thought of myself and my Creator*” (p.4). In speaking of the intellectual influence of Joseph Butler on him, he refers to “*the theory, to which I was inclined as a boy, viz. the unreality of material phenomena*” (p.11). That is to say, for whatever reasons he was inclined from his early years to rest in the unseen God as being of greater import and substance than the world that is seen. This natural religious temperament placed him, obviously, at an advantage in respect to the formal embrace of religious faith. There are others — especially in the modern Western secular culture — in whom the opposite tendency prevails. They, from their earliest years, tend to rest only in the thought of this visible world. Even

if their imaginations float above the hard visible facts of life, still, their thoughts and reveries remain confined to this world. They are not by mental inclination bent towards God and religion. There are others with a more serious difficulty. Anyone who is familiar with the inner life of Oxford University and especially of Oriel College in the 1820s and 1830s would know of Joseph Blanco White. He was a Spanish born ex-Catholic priest who wrote works when in England against the Catholic Church. In his book, *The Present Position of Catholics*, Newman considers Blanco White, who in the late 1820s had been his friend, and shows by examining his published works that he never had joy in religion. He concludes that in respect to religion, Blanco White had “*some radical defect of mind*” (IV, 3).

Our intellectual bent will assist or hinder us in coming to terms with this or that truth, whatever be the order of truth to which it pertains. A case in point is the truth of the resurrection from the dead. The study of comparative religions would suggest that the belief in a hereafter of

some kind is the normal belief of man. However, there is no unanimity in respect to its nature. In our Gospel today (Mark 12:18-27) the Sadducees approach our Lord with their objection to the doctrine of the resurrection from the dead. It would seem that the Sadducees took their stand on the inspiration of the Books of the Pentateuch alone — the first five books of the Bible. There was no warrant in these Books, so *they* thought, for a doctrine of the resurrection. Our Lord answered their difficulty by quoting from the Pentateuch — specifically, from the Book of Exodus. They *understood neither the Scriptures nor the power of God*, he said to them. The point here is that whatever be our particular mental temperament or intellectual bent, whatever be our assumptions and starting points, we must overcome all obstacles in the way of accepting the truth. This applies especially to the revealed truth of God. We may be inclined to religion and the things of God; we may, on the contrary, be inclined to rest only in the things we can see; we may have even deeper difficulties with any religious truth — and the sad case of Blanco White comes

to mind. But whatever be our bent, we must so act and think as to be governed by the truth. We must forego our own inclinations and so adjust as to attain the truth and be subject to it. The greater the struggle against inner obstacles to the truth, the greater the merit in overcoming them. Towards the end of his life, Newman wrote that some of our deepest assumptions and starting points are beyond our own sight and consciousness. We must ask God to implant in us, by his grace, the right starting points, the right first principles. On the basis of these we shall be open to the truth. Our Gospel today reminds us of a great and essential truth in revealed religion. This life is not all that there is. We shall rise again in the flesh — to glory or to damnation.

We have a great prospect to look forward to every day. Father Patrick Peyton, the Irish promoter of family prayer across the world some decades ago, was once asked about death. He said that he looked forward to his death. Death was the occasion when he would be going to meet God and our Lord. The disciple of Christ longs to see the

face of Jesus, and this longing will be fulfilled following on death. At our death, our soul goes to meet Christ for judgment. At the end of time we shall be reunited with our bodies, and live forever thus — risen in the flesh. Let us so live as to be judged worthy of a place in the abode prepared for us by God.

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Second reflection:

In the midst of suffering There is a beautiful book of the Old Testament, that of Tobit. Tobit was a very good Jew, scrupulously observant of the revealed Law of God, and full of charity and justice towards his neighbour. Yet a personal catastrophe befell him. He was blinded. I have known people who have turned away from God because of painful things that have happened to them. Now, I am not sure at all that before those painful things occurred they were notably religious and notably

charitable. Whatever the case may be, this turning away from God as a *result* of suffering and forms of evil certainly occurs. Any turning away from God can be very difficult to undo, once done. However understandable it may be, it is always a tragedy and never justified. Tobit did not do that. In her frustration, his wife poured scorn on the value of his good works, in view of his misfortunes. But Tobit did not turn away from God, though he had no explanation for what had befallen him. He was ultimately rewarded, as the book of Tobit shows.

God will reward those who trust him and who are faithful to him, whatever life may bring. We are reminded of St Thomas More who wrote to his daughter (in words to this effect) while awaiting the scaffold, that *I may lose my head, but I shall come to no harm.*



Thursday of the ninth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 25 (24):16, 18 Turn to me and have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am alone and poor. See my lowliness and suffering and take away all my sins, my God.

Collect O God, whose providence never fails in its design, keep from us, we humbly beseech you, all that might harm us and grant all that works for our good. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Timothy 2:8-15; Ps. 24; Mark 12:28-34

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all

your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”
“Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions. (Mark 12: 28-34)

The Good News Perhaps we could say that the primary revelation given by God to his chosen people was summed up in the first commandment: there is but one God, and he alone is to be worshipped. There is some debate, incidentally, as to whether monotheism as such — that there is but one God — stood forth in all its starkness from the beginning in the mind of the chosen people. Some scholars claim that at the outset what was primarily taken up was that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

was alone to be worshipped — and never any other (“strange”) gods. Gradually it was realized that the original revelation by the God of the Hebrews included the cardinal truth that there is actually only *one true* God. He is the God of *all* things, the God of the nations and of history, and the “gods” that the Gentiles worshipped were mere phantoms or even demons. But that this was *revealed* did not mean, of course, that it was impossible for some Gentile thinker or “prophet” to hit on the truth that there was but one God. Aristotle got to his First Cause, a Being who is pure actuality and whose life is self-contemplative thought. This Supreme Being imparts movement to the universe, and this movement emanates from the First Cause as *desirable*. This “monotheism”, of course, scarcely had any effect on Greek polytheist religion. What I am saying here, though, is that the mere fact that God revealed something about himself did not mean that the truth he revealed was accessible only by means of that special and supernatural revelation. There are indeed things of capital importance that God has revealed to man,

and which are beyond his natural understanding — but not all that has been supernaturally revealed is of this order. Something of the same can be said, I think, of certain other truths revealed in the religion of the Old Testament. We are speaking of the Law, the Prophets, the Psalms, the Writings. In our Gospel passage today, our Lord is asked by a well-meaning scribe, *“Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”* *“The most important one,”* answered Jesus, *“is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these”* (Mark 12: 28-34). Is knowledge of this accessible *only* from supernatural revelation?

Well, I can imagine a deeply religious soul, with no contact with the historical revelation that comes to us through Abraham and the prophets, proposing a comparable Golden Rule of love for God and neighbour, at least roughly and to a point. It certainly fits with man’s

instinctive yearnings. In Hinduism, in contrast to *kāma* which is selfish or pleasurable love, *prema* – or *prem* – refers to elevated love. *Bhakti* is a Sanskrit term, meaning “loving devotion to the supreme God.” Hindu writers, theologians, and philosophers have distinguished nine forms of *bhakti*. On the mystic side of Hinduism, it seems that one of the forms of Yoga includes *Ishvarapranidhana*, or self-surrender to “God” and His worship. From a different and more recent tradition, Bahá’u’lláh (1817–1892), born in Tehran (Persia), was the founder of the Bahá’í Faith. He claimed to be a messenger from God fulfilling the final expectations of Islam, Christianity, and other major religions. He wrote many religious works, which included teachings on the love of God. Those of the Bahá’í Faith hold that the love of God (God’s love for us, primarily) is the primary reason for human creation, and one of the foremost purposes of life. The love of God purifies human hearts and through it humans become *transformed* and *self-sacrificing*, as they reflect more the attributes and qualities of God. All this is much to be

praised, reflecting man's search for the noble and spiritual life, though at times it also reflect a certain borrowing from Judaeo-Christian revelation.

All this may be said to remind us of our Gospel today, in which our Lord expresses the essence of the Old Testament religion. There is but one God, and he commands us to love him with our whole being and our neighbour as ourselves. We are not speaking here of a mere *high god* who commands that we love him above all else. It is the *one and only* God who revealed himself to Moses, the Patriarchs and the prophets, he who is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord confirms this primary revelation. But there is also this critically important addition. Christ brings with him the Good News that the rule and lordship of this one true God is now entirely *possible* in the heart of sinful man. Man is now, in principle, *truly able* to love God with his whole being — which is to say, to accept God as his Lord and Master utterly. It is done through faith in Jesus Christ, and through the divine grace that comes therefrom. By this

grace of Christ, man is *able* to love God and neighbour as he should.

Faith in Jesus Christ is the foundation of revealed religion. By faith in Jesus Christ and the acceptance of his word for love of him, man is rendered open to the gift of the Holy Spirit and his grace. He enters into union with Jesus Christ and shares his divine life. Thus is he empowered to become a child of God and live the commandment of love. It is this which is so distinctive about the Christian religion, flowing from the ineffable Person and work of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God. It is one thing to have the blessing of revelation. We know from God that we must love him with all our being. It is an especially wonderful thing to have this made possible for us. This is what has happened by the work of Christ. He has saved us, and opened for us the path to sanctity.



Friday of the ninth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 25 (24):16, 18 Turn to me and have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am alone and poor. See my lowliness and suffering and take away all my sins, my God.

Collect O God, whose providence never fails in its design, keep from us, we humbly beseech you, all that might harm us and grant all that works for our good. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Timothy 3:10-17; Psalm 118;
Mark 12:35-37

While Jesus was teaching in the temple courts, he asked, “Why do the teachers of the law say that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared: “‘The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.”’“ David himself calls him ‘Lord.’ How then can he be his

son?” The large crowd listened to him with delight. (Mark 12: 35-37)

Scripture One of the very remarkable truths revealed by God is the *inspiration of the Bible*. Here we have a collection of ancient scrolls put together in one volume by Christ’s Church and carried by her through the centuries to be handed to each of her faithful. She, the mother of her spiritual children, says to all: *this Book has God the most holy Trinity for its Author*. Read it constantly and prayerfully. In it God tells us how to live in a way pleasing to him. As is well known, over some centuries different religious groupings came to form their various authorized lists of Books they held to be inspired. For instance, Rabbinic Judaism recognizes the twenty-four books of the Masoretic Text, commonly called the “Hebrew Bible.” The Samaritans considered the Torah (the five “Books of Moses”) to be inspired scripture, but did not accept any other parts of the Bible. The fully dogmatic teaching of the Catholic Church on the list of inspired Books of the Bible was set forth in the Council of Trent of 1546. But the first

church council that accepted the Catholic list of inspired Books may have been the list issued by Pope Damasus I at the council of Rome (382 AD). This list of Books is the same as we have them today, though some of the Books were later combined or titled differently. Having set forth its list, that council of Rome also decreed that *“After the announcement of all of these prophetic and evangelic as well as apostolic writings which we have listed above as Scriptures, on which, by the grace of God, the Catholic Church is founded, we have considered that it ought to be announced that although all the Catholic Churches spread abroad through the world comprise but one bridal chamber of Christ, nevertheless, the holy Roman Church has been placed at the forefront not by the conciliar decisions of other Churches, but has received the primacy by the evangelic voice of our Lord and Saviour, who says: ‘You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it; and I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you shall have bound on earth will be bound in*

heaven, and whatever you shall have loosed on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”” By implication, this council states that Christ’s Church, and in particular the See of Rome, is the authoritative determiner of the Canon of Holy Scripture. The *Church* decides what is part of Scripture.

Pope Damasus’ commissioning of the Latin Vulgate edition of the Bible (about 383) was also instrumental in the fixation of the Canon of the Bible in the West. The Synod of Hippo Regius in North Africa (393 AD) included a list and the acts of this council were accepted by the Councils of Carthage in 397 and 419. The Canon of Scripture in these two Councils (which were under the authority of St. Augustine) were the same as that of Pope Damasus. In 405, Pope Innocent I had sent a list of the sacred Books to a Gallic bishop, Exsuperius of Toulouse. So then, when all is said and done, we accept the inspiration of the particular Books of the Holy Scriptures *on the authority of the Church*, and we do this because this authority has been granted her by Jesus Christ her founder. But of course, the Church from the beginning took her cue

from the *Master* — he loved the Scriptures and regarded them as authored by the Divine Spirit, which was the Spirit of the Father and himself. He did not provide his disciples with a formal and definitive list of the Holy Writings, not least because a significant portion of them was not yet in existence: what we now call the *New Testament*. One result of the inspired writing of the Gospels, for instance, is that we are able to catch a glimpse of our Lord's own immense love for the Scriptures, and his frequent recourse to them. All of this brings us to our Gospel passage today (Mark 12: 35-37), in which our Lord quotes one of the Psalms (110) — and his use of it has given to this particular Psalm a special importance in the prayer of the Church. “*Why do the teachers of the law say that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared: ‘The Lord said to my Lord: Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.’ David himself calls him ‘Lord.’ How then can he be his son?*” Christ would seem to be stating that David did indeed write this Psalm. He was inspired by the Holy

Spirit in the writing of it, and it involves a prophecy concerning the Messiah. The Messiah is David's "Lord" and yet his "son". It implies too that the Holy Spirit was conveying much more than David, the immediate author being divinely moved, was aware of. The Psalm goes on to speak of the Messiah as King and Priest, a priest forever of the order of Melchisedech.

The Psalm quoted by our Lord is thus revealed to be rich indeed. Our Lord's words about it are illustrative not only of the future Messiah, but of the profound wealth of Holy Scripture far beyond the immediate sense of the inspired author — important as this immediate sense is. Let us ponder our Gospel passage today, asking for the grace to enter more fully into the mind of Jesus Christ in respect to Holy Scripture. *Let this mind be in you*, St Paul writes in one of his Letters, *that was in Christ Jesus*. This includes our daily use of Holy Scripture — for as St Jerome once wrote, ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ. This is very important, for as our Lord

himself said, *Eternal life is this, to know you, Father, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*



Saturday of the ninth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 25 (24):16, 18 Turn to me and have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am alone and poor. See my lowliness and suffering and take away all my sins, my God.

Collect O God, whose providence never fails in its design, keep from us, we humbly beseech you, all that might harm us and grant all that works for our good. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Timothy 4:1-8; Psalm 70;
Mark 12:38-44

As he taught, Jesus said, “Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at banquets. They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished

most severely.” Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything — all she had to live on.” (Mark 12: 38-44)

Happiness I suppose we could say that in ordinary and everyday language, to be “happy” signifies being contented with one’s lot, or being fortunate or lucky. There is a sense in which the “happy” person is one blessed with well-being or flourishing, and there is a sense in which the “happy” person possesses a personal tranquillity (as in being contented). He has attained a happy *life*, or he is *inwardly* happy. Of course, to judge a person to be in a state of well-being or flourishing will depend one’s values. I may think that the “happy” life is one marked by financial

success, or by a luckily stable family life, or by physical health, or by success in one's profession. These are images of the happy life, and such images of happiness may involve a few *theories* about happiness: that happiness is the experience of pleasure, or that happiness is the satisfaction of one's desires (which may not be the same as mere pleasure), or that happiness is the fulfilment of one's capacities. In envisioning the happy life, most mature persons will probably include all three notions to a greater or lesser extent. As far as I am aware, Aristotle proposed that well-being and flourishing (a happy life) consists principally in a life of virtuous activity. But what did Aristotle mean by *virtue*? It meant living according to our true nature and fulfilling our human capacities. In general, he thought, we evaluate a thing as a good thing of its kind if it performs the function of that kind well. For example, a good hammer is one that drives nails well. A good apple tree is one that produces lots of good fruit. Accordingly, the good life for a human being is the life of functioning well *as a person*. We need not digress further into

Aristotle, but I suspect that he envisioned the highest human virtue as attained and present in human *wisdom* – which is to say the wisdom of an accomplished thinker (perhaps like Socrates, or his old master Plato, or, well, even *himself*). It is said that he encouraged Alexander, his pupil, to harbour ambitions to conquer Persia (the dream of Alexander’s father Phillip), and I am not sure how this contributed to Alexander’s own notions of the virtuous and “happy” life. But I am confident that Alexander’s notion of happiness was deeply connected with an image of supreme power and glory. All this is to say that there are and have been notions and images innumerable of the “happy life”.

This broad fact, so evident in human thought and life, manifests the undying quest of man for happiness, and the tragedy of its frequent frustration. Man wants to be happy, but generally he has no idea how to attain it, and generally he has no correct notion of what it consists in. He picks up assumptions and runs with them for the rest of his life, never attaining what he desires. If he considers the matter

with some attention, he is very liable to pass beyond those which are obviously wrong to those which prove to be similarly ephemeral. It is one of the greatest questions in human history, the question of what it is that makes a “happy life”, and of what will give personal happiness too. All of this brings us to our Gospel passage today (Mark 12: 38-44), in which we see our Lord observing two classes of persons. Let us consider the scene in view of the quest of man for the happy life. *“Jesus said, ‘Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at banquets.’”* There we have religious professionals who were seeking honour in the eyes of a religious populace. They sought to be religious and God-fearing, while turning this to personal account and gaining the esteem of those who observed them. They also sought riches at the expense of others: *“They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.”* So honour and wealth

were seen by them, without their admitting it to their own consciences, as integral to human happiness (which, to a point, it generally is). It replaced, though, the supreme position which *God* should occupy in the heart of man. Our scene shifts to those who are contributing to the Temple Treasury. “*Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.*” There are the rich, those who possess a certain happiness, and there is the poor widow who has nothing of that kind of happiness. As we see from our Lord’s declaration on her: “*This poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.*” Now, this also tells us about happiness.

In our Lord’s view, which is the all-knowing and infallible judgment of the incarnate Son of God, that poor widow who had nothing, and who was nothing in the eyes of those who happened to see her, had attained the “happy life”, and in a deeper sense, personal inner happiness. Her

happiness was in God and in giving all to God — everything she had to live on. As at the beginning, the Spirit of God hovered over “the waters” of her heart and soul. She was poor in spirit, and so possessed the kingdom of God. In her own way, she reflected the mind of Jesus Christ, who in due course would give of his all to his heavenly Father on the cross, bereft of everything. His happiness consisted in doing the will of his Father. Christ shows us “the happy life”, and how to gain true happiness. If we live in him, his joy will be ours.



Tenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 27 (26):1-2 The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; whom should I dread? When those who do evil draw near, they stumble and fall.

Collect O God, from whom all good things come, grant that we, who call on you in our need, may at your prompting discern what is right, and by your guidance do it. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Hosea 6:3-6; Psalm Ps 50:1, 8, 12-15;
Romans 4:18-25; Matthew 9:9-13

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. Follow me, he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his

disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'? On hearing this, Jesus said, It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. (Matthew 9:9-13)

Saint Matthew Æthelberht (also Æthelbert, Aethelberht, Aethelbert, or Ethelbert) (c. 560–616) was King of Kent (in Britain) from about 580 or 590 until his death. In his ***Ecclesiastical History of the English People***, St Bede lists Æthelberht as the third king to hold a rule over other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. He married Bertha, the Christian daughter of Charibert, king of the Franks. Some think that the influence of Bertha may have played a part in the decision by Pope Gregory I to send Augustine as a missionary from Rome. Augustine landed on the Isle of Thanet in east Kent in 597. Shortly thereafter, Æthelberht was converted to Christianity, churches were established, and wider-scale conversion to Christianity began in the

kingdom. Æthelberht provided the new church with land in Canterbury, at what came to be known as St Augustine's Abbey. Æthelberht later was canonized, and in the 2004 edition of the Roman Martyrology, he is listed under his date of death, 24 February, with the citation: "*King of Kent, converted by St Augustine, bishop, the first leader of the English people to do so*". The Catholic Archdiocese of Southwark, which contains Kent, commemorates him on 25 February. The point to be noticed here is that St Augustine of Canterbury converted Æthelberht, and the conversion of many of the English followed. This is a pattern which has at various times been pursued: convert the ruler, and the rest will follow. Go after those with manifest position and influence, and the net thus cast might catch many more in the process. If you concentrate your efforts just on the street-cleaners, you are hardly likely to convert the nation because street-cleaners have no influence. It is a question of the domino-effect. As U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower put it during an April 7, 1954 news conference: "You have a row of dominoes set

up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly.” It all makes sense, and when it comes to evangelization in the name of Jesus Christ, the missionary ought to be as innocent as a dove and as shrewd as a serpent. Making a genuine convert of the person of social influence just might get the rest. There are plenty of cases to prove the validity of this theoretical possibility. Augustine’s conversion of Æthelberht began the millennium-long Catholic life of England — till another king some nine hundred years later changed it all.

Well, one would have thought that God would have done the same. The whole world was in a mess, due to the sin of our first parents. There was a lot of fixing-up to do, and God intended to do it. That it was to be a world-wide operation is plain: “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations*” (Matthew 28:18-19). By his death and resurrection he had established the kingdom of God on earth and entrusted it to his Church. The kingdom was

present in his person, and entry into the kingdom was gained by means of union with him. It was to be a universal kingdom and eternal. This was quite an undertaking, to say the least — and one would have expected that Christ would have first converted those of ability, influence and position. With them won over to the Cause, the rest would follow in tow. But what happened? The pattern followed by the great God was illustrated from the very beginning of the Messiah's life. He was born in a stable, and the heavenly celebration of the event was revealed not to Caesar but to some unknown shepherds. *“And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them ... and the angel said to them: Be not afraid: for behold I bring you good news of a great joy”*. The Messiah, the Lord, had been born! (Luke 2: 8-10). But what could they do about it? Nothing — but such was the *divine* style of things. Some might have thought that God did not seem to have gone about things the best way. All

of this brings us to our Gospel passage today (Matthew 9:9-13), in which Christ is gathering his forces for the mission that would last till the end of the world. Who does he gather about him? You would think he would have gathered around him people of real influence who would be able to push the great Work along. But no — he here stops to call to himself an ordinary (and despised) *tax collector*. And that was not all. He was gathering around him what many regarded as the worst types: “*As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector’s booth. Follow me, he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew’s house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples.*” Many tax collectors and sinners!

As a matter of fact, the great God often chose what was weak, and thereby his power was revealed. How odd of God to choose the Jews, as has been said (attributed to William Norman Ewer, 1885–1976). God chose a people of little influence, and yet as our Lord said, *salvation is*

from the Jews, for he, the Saviour of the world, was a Jew. Even when it came to the path of the Saviour, it was a path of ignominy — he ended up on the Cross, and it was that Cross that saved us. The call of Matthew in our Gospel passage today is somewhat iconic of the ways of God. All of this means that the little person counts — you and I — so we had better make the very best of the talent given us.

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Second reflection: Matthew 9: 9-13

God of mercy There are two things which modern secular man, the man who tends to think that this world is all that there is, has a hard time realizing. The first is that there is a holy and moral God, and the second is that there is not merely wrongdoing but sin. While a practical atheism is now, I believe, fairly common because of indifference towards religion, it is, however, also fairly common for one who is scarcely religious to believe in a distant higher Power. I remember watching some episodes of the TV series shown in the 1980s entitled “Cold

Warrior” — the lead character was asked if he believed in God. He believed, he said, in a higher Power. At that time, out-and-out atheism was hardly respectable, but out-and-out personal religion in which God was a heartfelt reality was hardly respectable either. God was a distant Power to whom one did not have recourse in one’s independent living of a moral life — moral, that is, in certain respects but not in others. Many philosophers of the modern era have been well known for their atheism. One was Professor Anthony Flew. The atheist Flew then became well known for his conversion to theism. But it was an intellectual conversion to an Architect of the Universe that accounted for the order and system he had long noticed in the basic components of life. It certainly did not lead to any acceptance of Revelation, and Flew hastened to insist that it made no practical difference to life. *The Mind of God: The Scientific Basis for a Rational World* (1992) by Paul Davies, offered a tour and explanation of theories, both physical and metaphysical, regarding ultimate causes. He concluded with his

statement that “*the existence of mind in some organism on some planet in the universe is surely a fact of fundamental significance. Through conscious beings, the universe has generated self-awareness. This can be no trivial detail, no minor by-product of mindless, purposeless forces. We are truly meant to be here.*” So basically Davies got to a Designer — the Mind of the Universe. This is helpful in an age when God is deemed to be dead. Long ago Aristotle got beyond the gods of the myths to the Prime Mover, the Pure Act that moves the universe by the desire it/he inspires. But of course, in Aristotle, as in Flew and Davies, the ultimate Power is not one who *loves* us — at most, such a personal quality as this is absolutely in the background.

I believe that, as a matter of fact, the notion of a loving Creator who is holy and moral is in the background not only of very many philosophies, but of most religions. The classical religions did not feature gods who loved man with a powerful and tender love. Those gods lived their lives in the heavens, put up with man unless irritated, and

at most assisted when pleased with man's attention. Basically, though, they were reflections of fallen man writ large. While man does have an instinctive sense that the Power or powers above are good enough to be turned to for help, they are not seen as especially loving and considerate of human misery. Their power is limited, as is their mercy. This is the striking feature of historical Revelation: God is a God of compassion and mercy — while being all-holy. As we read in the Book of Exodus, the Lord *“proclaimed, ‘The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty ..”* (34:6-7). So God is loving and holy. He is compassionate and merciful to the lowly, abhorring sin withal. There are many other things which divine revelation has brought to man about God (such as his almighty power) but his mercy and holiness have been especially surprising. The iconic picture of this is given to us by our Lord in his parable of the father of the prodigal

son, a father who ran to his repentant son to welcome him home. All through history, this announcement of a God of mercy who has sent his Son to deliver man from the morass of sin has been the ringing element in the Good News — but it has to be heard. This is where the lack of a sense of sin is so critical. It is one thing for society to be aware of wrongdoing and guilt (and to punish it), it is a further thing to be aware of the seriousness of *sin*. Man offends *God* and needs his pardon and mercy. This is what is especially needful in the man and woman of our day, for we characteristically lack the sense of *sin* — lacking as we do a strong sense of the living *God*. If we lack it we shall not be interested in a God of mercy. All of this brings us to our Gospel today (Matthew 9: 9-13), in which our Lord insists that God is a God of mercy for the afflicted, a God who expects that we be merciful too.

There must have been something immensely attractive for the tax collectors and sinners about our Lord's holiness. They certainly felt themselves warmly welcomed and at ease in his company. There was no doubt in their hearts as

to his holiness — that was the only reason why they were so interested in him. But it was a holiness that was so very compassionate and understanding, a holiness in which they felt loved, a holiness in the presence of which all misery, especially the misery of sin, felt consolation. The only proviso was that they recognized their sinfulness and aspired to something much better. In other words, the all-holy incarnate Son of God was rich in mercy. This is what pre-eminently he came to reveal, that *God is rich in mercy*.



Monday of the tenth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 27 (26):1-2 The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; whom should I dread? When those who do evil draw near, they stumble and fall.

Collect O God, from whom all good things come, grant that we, who call on you in our need, may at your prompting discern what is right, and by your guidance do it. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Kings 17:1-6; Psalm 121:1bc-8;

Matthew 5:1-12

Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are

the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:1-12)

The Beatitudes What is the common image of Moses? For the average person of the present age and of the centuries past it has been that of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on the stone tablets from God and bringing them down the Mountain to the people of God. That is how he is generally pictured in the mind's eye of people — together with other images of him, of course, such as his leading the crossing over the Red Sea. Moses

is pictured on the Mountain receiving the Law (the Ten Commandments) and delivering it to the people. This was certainly iconic for the chosen people of God — the Five Books of Moses (the Pentateuch or Torah) were the foundation of the Revealed Religion of Judaism. The first book of the Pentateuch, the Book of Genesis, may be seen as the great Introduction to the next four books, which narrated God's entry into the life of his chosen people, his saving them from oppression in Egypt and his giving his Law to them through Moses. The Books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy spell out God's Law for his people. Moses is speaking on behalf of God throughout these four Books, reaching its zenith in the final chapters. The people are to return to the Lord their God, *“and obey his voice in all that I command you this day, with all your heart and with all your soul ... therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice and cleaving to him; for that means life to you and length of days”* (Deuteronomy 30: 2.19-20). Moses on the Mountain is the

primary image — Moses receiving the Law there, and then subsequently instructing the chosen people as recorded in the Torah. Now, one of the notable features about the Law of God as presented in the Books of Moses is its concrete character. The Ten Commandments are clear, definite, concrete. *You shall not have strange gods before Me. You shall not take My name in vain. You shall keep the Sabbath holy. You shall honour your father and your mother.* You shall not kill, nor commit adultery, nor steal, nor bear false witness, nor covet your neighbour's wife or his goods. They are the great elements of the primary charter, and it grows in detail as the Torah proceeds. Procedures of worship (Leviticus) and social life (Numbers) are all laid down. The whole of life in its practical detail is to be subject to the Lord God of Israel.

It is generally recognized that Matthew's Gospel is the most Hebraic of the Gospels, in the sense that it has most allusions to the fulfilment of the Hebrew Scriptures and appears most oriented to a Hebrew readership. Of course, this is no more than a matter of degree because all

four Gospels are very Scriptural: they set Jesus Christ in the context of the sweep of Holy Scripture. But in Matthew this is particularly manifest — and my point here is that Matthew would have been especially conscious of the figure of *Moses* and of how Jesus Christ is his fulfilment. Christ is the *new Moses* who is leading God's people to the true Promised Land. He has a new Law by which we are to live. Now, one of the distinctive features of Matthew's Gospel is his Sermon on the Mount — Luke has its parallel (6: 20-49), indicating the historicity of this sermon, but Matthew's is the much more extensive text. The Sermon on the Mount is parallel to the scene of Moses on Mount Horeb in the Torah's Book of Exodus. Just as the Ten Commandments of the Book of Exodus (20: 1-17) is followed by a very protracted series of texts spelling out the details of life and worship according to the Revealed Law, so also in the Sermon on the Mount there are the Beatitudes at the beginning (Matthew 5:1-11), and this is followed by numerous particular prescriptions (5:12-7:27). Those prescriptions are various in character and kind, but

the parallel between Jesus Christ and Moses is there. Jesus is the *new Moses*, and at the end of his discourse “*the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes*” (7:28-29). Now, what we notice about the Beatitudes is that they are not, as are the Ten Commandments, especially concrete. That is to say, they require, speak of, extol and “beatify” *qualities of the heart*. Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the merciful, the pure of heart, those who are persecuted and insulted because of their manifest faith and obedience to God. This charter is less concerned with laying down specific behaviour — that comes later. Christ is asking for a new heart, a heart, in fact, modelled on his own. This is what is offered, promised and required of those who wish to be part of the Kingdom of God that consists in union with Jesus Christ. Christ’s offer is of a new heart, a new mind — a new man, in fact.

How are we to get a handle on the Beatitudes, which is what our Gospel passage today presents, and which

begins the great Sermon on the Mount? It presents the new heart which God plans to create within us by the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is none other than a share in the Spirit of Jesus Christ. The Beatitudes give us a window into the mind of Christ, and as St Paul writes, *Let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus* (Philippians 2:5). It gives us the great markers or characteristics of the renewed heart of the disciple of Jesus Christ. This *is the will of God*, St Paul writes, *your sanctification*. In his Beatitudes, Jesus Christ describes the *sanctified heart*, the heart of the disciple, the heart of one who has entered the Kingdom by means of faith in him and obedience to his word. Let us love the Beatitudes and strive to make them the scaffolding of our life.



Tuesday of the tenth week of Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: 1 Kings 17:7-16; Psalm 4:2-5, 7b-8;
Matthew 5:13-16

Jesus said to his disciples: You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do

people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:13-16)

Christ In about 343 BC, Aristotle was invited by Philip II of Macedon to become teacher of his son Alexander — and with that, he was appointed head of the royal academy of Macedon. During his period as head of the academy, Aristotle taught Alexander and at least two other future kings: Ptolemy and Cassander. He encouraged Alexander in his ambitions to overcome Persia, advising him to look after the Greeks as after friends and relatives, and to deal with the barbarians as one would beasts or plants. Actually, Aristotle knew a lot about beasts and plants — indeed he studied almost every possible subject at the time and made great contributions to most of them: anatomy, astronomy, geography, geology, physics and zoology. He is especially famous for his philosophical prowess, writing on ethics, aesthetics, metaphysics,

politics, rhetoric and natural theology — to name but some of his philosophical interests. He had an encyclopaedic knowledge and extraordinary intellectual penetration. When Alexander was nearing the end of his short but stellar life, he was perhaps getting a little paranoid and began to suspect plots against himself. He had executed Aristotle's grandnephew Callisthenes as a traitor, and Aristotle himself had manifest contempt for Alexander's pretensions to divinity. In correspondence, the young empire-builder threatened his old teacher. Now, sordid politics aside — all up, Aristotle made for himself an immemorial reputation for his doctrine, especially in certain fundamental areas of philosophy. His thought has had an immense influence. But he never presumed to think that the one possessing his corpus of thought would have the key to the life and security of the world. He never suggested to his students such as the teenage Alexander that, precisely because he had been taught by Aristotle, he would be the light for the peoples he conquered — though he certainly encouraged Alexander to go forth and conquer.

One suspects, indeed, that the impression formed by the privileged likes of Alexander was that Aristotle's distinguished teaching was best confined to *them*, the privileged few. By confining it to them, it helped *their status*. When the grand old philosopher began to publish his works, Alexander complained to him: "*You have not done well to publish your doctrines; for in what shall I surpass other men if those doctrines wherein I have been trained are to be all men's common property?*"

In this example, we are reminded of one of the distinctive features of Jesus Christ and his teaching: his colossal and unashamed *claims*. I remember travelling years ago with a party of German Catholics and one of their priests referred to the then-Cardinal Archbishop of Munich. The Archbishop was in his early sixties, he said — and therefore in the prime of life, at the height of his powers and maturity. Jesus Christ, if we may say so without disrespect, was barely out of his twenties, a young man by modern standards, and making the most astonishing claims of all. No-one in their right mind, we

would normally say, would make such claims as he made. Yes indeed — Jesus Christ, in view of his unique claims, would have to have been either a knave or a fool were those claims untrue. But all know that he was neither. Aristotle would never have said that he was the Light of the world, but Jesus Christ calmly said this and much more. He was the world's only Light, and he, that Light, was the Life of man. *I am the Resurrection and the Life*, he said. The man who believes in me will have Life and will live forever (John 11:26) — and I am giving signs of the truth of this (John 11:40). Aristotle never claimed that the one who accepted his teaching would be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Alexander came to think that *he* was the salt of the earth as he conceived this to be — and his old teacher laughed at him (behind his back). But Jesus Christ said to his disciples, to those who accepted his teaching and him as their Teacher, that “*You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men. You are the light of*

the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.” His disciples were the salt of the *whole earth* and the light of the *whole world* because they had Christ, and that is why before the risen Christ ascended into heaven he commissioned his disciples to go to the whole world. “*Go, therefore and make disciples of all the nations*” (Matthew 28:19). “*Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation*” (Mark 16: 15). On the Mountain during the Transfiguration, the Father had said: “*Listen to him*” (Luke 9:35). *All* are to listen to him – *all*.

From the outset of his public ministry, Jesus Christ presented himself as the one name that mattered. We read how during his conversation with the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s Well he told her quite simply and directly that *he* was the Messiah (John 4: 25-26). I assume that he did the same thing with his first disciples. We read that on the threshold of Christ’s public ministry soon after his baptism by John, John’s two disciples followed Jesus and stayed

with him that day. The next day, one of them, Andrew, told his brother Simon that “*we have found the Messiah*” (John 1: 35-42). Jesus would have told them that he was the Messiah. As we read in the Gospels, there was much more to come. Ah yes! Jesus Christ, the jewel of our race, the incomparable One, the Saviour of all!



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Scripture today: Acts 11:21b-26; 12:1-3; Psalm 98:1-6;
Matthew 5:17-19

Jesus said to his disciples: Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the

Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practises and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.
(Matthew 5:17-19)

Sanctity It is difficult to believe that some educated persons think that the only certain realities are those which are empirically verifiable. But so it is, and there is a strong philosophical current that defends this position. It reduces reality to the material, and the test of any claim as to something being true and real (apart from a mathematical abstraction, such as $2+2=4$) is its capacity to pass the test of empirical and material measurement. In one sense, this assumption is natural in that, obviously, we do not see, feel, touch or taste anything that is not in some sense material. That is to say, non-material realities are not, in the nature of the case, immediately evident to us. But then comes the assertion that *therefore* they do not *exist*, and any certitude in respect to them is out of the

question. There is one crass corollary of this, and it is that the universe does not have any fundamental moral character (for how could this be verified empirically?). The universe is just physical, it has no spiritual component at all, events are random and have no deeper meaning or purpose and there can be no moral consequences to our actions. Thus, for some, we live in an amoral or nihilistic universe — as in Nietzsche’s “God is dead,” aphorism. It is Dostoyevsky’s reply that “if God does not exist, then everything is permitted”. It has to be said, of course, that this would be denied by various others — atheists, agnostics, most Buddhists and others who do believe in a moral universe but without the “God” feature. Well now, the universe is indeed of a fundamentally moral character, especially the world of humankind. While the universe, headed by man, is plainly physical, it is not only physical, nor is it primarily physical — for it is primarily moral. Consider the daily news as it is presented in the mass media. Take any category — let it be sport. Of course, the simple narration of sporting events and their upshot

occupies most of the reporting. But in the reporting there is the constant assumption that the activities reported are being conducted morally. Were there to be a departure from certain moral norms (as in bribery or embezzlement) the entire story would alter. The sensation would not be the sporting victory or defeat, but the immoral activity. Of course, only certain moral actions are at issue (and more important ones can be missed), but it indicates that all know that the fundamental thing is right moral action, however conceived.

Yes, despite the thinking of this or that philosopher, let alone the thoughts of this or that lazy or arrogant thinker, most people and most societies consider moral obligation to be more important than mere things. While the universe is physical, it is more a moral universe than a mere physical one. People may not themselves live up to their moral obligations, and due to stunted moral growth, they may have poor notions of the moral life. But deep within them there is the awareness that it is more important that they be morally good than that they have plenty of

bacon on the table. If they violate their moral obligations, there is a deeper pain piercing them than, say, the physical pain from not having eaten that missing bacon. All this is to say that the supreme thing in the world and in the universe is the moral life, and in particular, moral growth and perfection. The saint is the most important product of the universe if we may put it that way, and not mere physical nor, indeed, any other prowess. The supreme degradation of the universe is moral degradation, and indeed it is moral degradation which wreaks special havoc in the world. Hitler and Stalin were bad men, and they caused chaos in the world. The good man, because of his moral goodness, lifts the world up. The bad man degrades it. Now, divine revelation makes this very clear, and indeed takes the lead in ensuring that the moral life of the world eventually reigns supreme. When God created the world he made man its steward. He was to fill the earth and subdue it — he could eat of any tree of the garden. But one thing was absolutely essential: he was not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If he did this,

he would die (Genesis 1-2). That is, he had to subject himself to the moral law, to what was right. He could not arbitrarily decide for himself what was the right and wrong thing for him to do. The universe was a moral universe, subject to the moral law of the Creator. We know the moral disaster that ensued, and in its wake there flowed death. But God took the lead and in the fullness of time sent his only-begotten Son to set things right, and to provide man with the wherewithal to win the moral struggle. This brings us to our Gospel today (Matthew 5:17-19): “*Jesus said to his disciples: Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.*” Christ is the fulfilment of the moral law.

In Christ God has provided the world with the fullness of moral goodness and sanctity. The universe as encapsulated in man has the vocation to live the moral life to perfection. The world is not just sticks and stones, nor dust and ashes. It is that, and much, much more. From the beginning, in man who is its lord, it was called to moral

goodness. This fell to pieces, so God sent the Answer and there is now in the world, though unseen, a fount of all possible goodness and holiness. That Fount is Jesus Christ *in whom dwells the fullness of the Godhead bodily*, and *every heavenly blessing*. The supreme blessing is sanctity. *This is the will of God*, St Paul writes, *your sanctification*. This is what the world is all about, so let us seize the chance!



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Scripture today: 1 Kings 18:41-46; Psalm 65:10-13;

Matthew 5:20-26

Jesus said to his disciples: I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders

will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell. Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift. Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny. (Matthew 5:20-26)

Religion Following Socrates and his successors and many modern biologists, we may denote the human being as a *species* and each individual human being as a member of that species. The term “species” comes from the Latin which means an appearance or look or form of a

thing — so we may take the *species* as referring, basically, to the immediate look or appearance of a thing. If we ask what is the *genus* or (general category) in which the human species is to be placed — the ancient Greeks (but not the biologists, for they have other classifications) would say that the *genus* of the human being is *animal*. Why do we make of the human being a distinct species of the genus of animal? We do this because the human being has a distinguishing characteristic marking it off from other animals. The Greeks said this characteristic was rationality. So Aristotle defined a human being as a rational animal. The Greeks, with their heightened appreciation of intellect threw rationality into the utmost prominence, but this is not the only feature of the human being that marks him off from the genus of animal. While John Henry Newman would in no way have questioned the Greek definition (which is traditional), he would, I think, have given a greater prominence to one feature of rationality: the *conscience*. In the debate following the publication by Darwin of his *Origin of Species*, Newman

allowed for the evolution (under divine providence and power) of the cognitive powers of an animal to a point very close to rationality, but he saw the decisive step as occurring with the appearance of the *conscience*. Man is especially, then, a being (an “animal”, let us say) with a conscience. Of course, there are agnostic and atheistic scientists who would reduce the conscience to, say, a form of social conditioning — and thus such discussions can be interminable. Another obvious distinction marking the human species off within the genus of animal is *religion*. The mere animal cannot be religious, but man and human societies are normally religious. Man, we might say, is a *religious* animal. Indeed, we must go further. While it is *good* for a man to develop his rational life to its best, it is *imperative* that man develop his religious life to its best. The one thing necessary for him is that he be supremely religious. The rest of the genus of animal has no such calling, but this is the distinctive calling of man, and the stakes are high.

The problem is, though, that while man is commonly religious, he commonly makes a poor showing of it. That is to say, commonly his religion does not present a very pretty picture, and this is because he is a fallen being — fallen especially in his moral life. Religion, as it is found in its practitioners, is all too often mired in sin and moral compromise. All of this brings us to our Gospel passage today (Matthew 5:20-26), because our Lord has things to say about how the religious professionals were practicing the religion which the great God himself had revealed to them, to that point. While from ages immemorial man had striven to reach the divine by developing his religions — and the archaeologists are forever discovering records of them — there was one people to whom the Creator and Lord of all had given a religion, the religion he wanted to see practised. Indeed, their mission was to bring this religion to “*all the families of the earth*” (Genesis 12:3), for by this religion the world would be saved. Salvation was from the Jews, as our Lord told one non-Jew (John 4:22). But the Jews, thus privileged, were not making a very good

job of it. There were many outstanding exceptions, such as the prophets, some of the kings and priests and others — they are recorded in the Scriptures. The Gospel of St Luke tells us of the holiness of Zechariah, Elizabeth, their son John, Simeon and Anna in the Temple, Joseph the husband of Mary and the great though hidden Mary herself. But by and large the chosen people did not have a lot to boast about in the matter of religious practice. Their boast was the Lord their God. The problem for man is not so much that religion is missing (our secular age borders on being an exception even to this), as that his religion is a poor business. Consider what our Lord has to say about the religious leaders of the chosen people — and we must remember that there were exceptions to this: *“Jesus said to his disciples: I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”* That having been said, what mankind does have is one of our race who is the absolute perfection of this one thing necessary, the possession and practice of perfect religion.

Man has something to show: it is Jesus Christ, the perfectly religious Man, our Teacher, perfect in every sense.

Not only is Jesus Christ the absolutely perfect Man of religion in the history of the human race, but he shows the perfect way to live the moral and religious life, which is the distinguishing feature and call of the human being. This is alluded to in our Gospel today: *“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”* There is One among us of whom God is proud, and of whom we are proud: Jesus Christ the Saviour of the world. Further, he gives us the grace to follow him and to be like him. Let us take our part with him, then, and never leave his side. He is *the Way, the Truth and the Life*.



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Scripture today: 1 Kings 19:9, 11-16; Ps 27:7-9abc, 13-14;
Matthew 5:27-32

Jesus said to his disciples: You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you

to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, unless the marriage is unlawful, causes her to commit adultery, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery. (Matthew 5:27-32)

God and the heart Atheism is becoming respectable, and for quite some time it has even been getting a bit popular. Without batting an eyelid or blushing at all, you can state on national television that you are an atheist. In one sense this is good, in that there is less and less cultural reason for subterfuge — and there is little point in being “religious” out of human respect. What may well develop, though, is social pressure militating against religious belief and the tenets of religion. Now, it is commonly denied that morality depends on religion — and, after all (so it is thought), what matters is not religion

but morality. The important thing is that you be moral, while religion is a personal option which may well help you to be moral or happy — but it is not necessary. One has only to think of the characters of pop literature and drama in, say, the cheap novels, comic strips and movies, over the past century (such as Tarzan, the Phantom, Superman, Spiderman and others), to see how the “good person” is not popularly perceived as religious. This notion is pressed home by the modern atheist. He endeavours to show that religious beliefs (in, say, a supernatural moral Being) are mere projections of the mind which have the function of maintaining man’s moral standards and happiness. Basically, when it comes to religion and its tenets as to ultimate Reality, there is nothing out there at all. The only things that exist are what you can see or measure. The rest is simply what you have been persuaded to think or imagine. I remember a very interesting television show (“Fear And Faith”, SBS channel, Australia) on the evening (8.35 pm) of January 28, 2013. The host of the show (Derren Brown) happily

declared himself to be an atheist and one of his projects on the show was to prove that if you are persuaded of the existence of an unseen presence, this will affect the morality of your actions. The point was that what “God” does for personal morality is what a belief in any personal presence will do. So two groups of persons were set to do a task *in the dark* that required honesty. Each person had to record whenever he or she made a mistake. Now, one group was led to believe that a presence was observing them in their actions. Needless to say, it was discovered that the group that thought a presence was watching proved to be the more honest. Those who thought no one was watching cheated.

This was said to show that what God does in moral action, *anything* can do — so there is no God out there. The Awesome Presence ensuring that we be moral is just a function of society, or man or other institutions or personal instincts that ensure that morality be maintained. Now, I do not wish to divert to a discussion of the lamentable logic of this. I simply draw out one implication of the denial of

an objective Personal Presence that watches our most secret actions. The fact is that morality is not simply external behaviour which is perceptible by others. You may not actually murder someone, but what would people think of you had you *wanted* to murder him, and actually *intended* to do so, but eventually decided not to (because, say, it wasn't worth the trouble)? You would be judged to be a bad person unless you had repented of your thoughts very sincerely. Morality does not simply embrace external action and what you say in the hearing of others. Even if your actions are moral *in the presence of others*, all understand that even this could be for reasons of *self-interest* rather than because of one's moral life as such. But it is also understood by all that one should be moral even when there is no chance of being observed by others — as in the realm of one's personal thought and desire. Were it to come to light that you *desired* to do someone harm, even if you never did this, still you would be judged to have done wrong in desiring this. You would have been acting immorally, though your action be interior. The

moral and good life includes, indeed *especially* includes, the thoughts of the heart. Now, our atheist friend of the SBS television program showed that the person (in the dark) who thinks that a presence is observing him was more honest than one who thought he was alone. What is to be expected of the one who thinks that no-one will observe his most secret thoughts — let alone his secret deeds? Our secret thoughts and desires are also the fruit of personal choice, or at least can be and often are. What is to be the moral force, the Voice that commands with absolute authority, in the realm of private morality, in the realm of the mind and heart out of the sight of others — if there is no God? The one who thinks that a divine Presence observes the secret thoughts of his heart will surely endeavour to think in a way that will please this Presence. If this Presence is a moral Presence, so will that person think and desire morally. For there will be a final Reckoning.

All of this brings us to our Gospel passage today. If there is one thing that Jesus Christ taught it is that the

moral and religious life does not simply consist of words and deeds done in the sight of others. Those who pray to gain the praise of men, our Lord said, already have their reward. Rather, *go to your private room and shut the door and your Father who sees what you do in secret will reward you.* In our Gospel passage today (Matthew 5:27-32), our Lord speaks of purity of the heart. One can sin just as terribly as if in deed, by the deliberate thoughts of the heart. What is the answer to this? It is to live constantly in the presence of God, knowing with absolute conviction that he is within. He sustains with his creative touch every nook and cranny of our being. He watches all and he will judge all our decisions, even the most secret. Those who do not believe in God have, in the nature of the case, a problem when it comes to morality of the heart. It is actually a great help to know that Someone is ever watching.



Saturday of the tenth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 27 (26):1-2 The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; whom should I dread? When those who do evil draw near, they stumble and fall.

Collect O God, from whom all good things come, grant that we, who call on you in our need, may at your prompting discern what is right, and by your guidance do it. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Kings 19:19-21; Ps 16:1b-2, 5, 7-10;

Matthew 5:33-37

Jesus said to his disciples: Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by

Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes', and your 'No', 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.
(Matthew 5:33-37)

The Truth In our Gospel today, our Lord directs that everything we say must be stamped by a deep truthfulness, such that our word on the matter will suffice — just as much as if what we say were said on oath. *“Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes', and your 'No', 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.”* We remember his high praise of Nathanael’s truthfulness at their first meeting: *“Here is a true Israelite in whom there is no guile”* (John 1: 47). Our Lord is also saying that we must not treat the great, unseen God casually by taking his name and calling him to witness unnecessarily. That is, you shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain (Exodus 20:7). But of course, all this depends on our possessing a profound sense of the very reality of the unseen God who sees and judges all — and this is modern

man's problem. For modern secular man, God is a device — and basically an illusion — the function of which is to make man happy and to keep up his standards of behaviour. God is not a truth but an item of technology. If “God” helps to keep you honest such that your “yes” truly is a “yes” and not really a “no”, then “God” has vindicated his usefulness, and religion is good because man is happy as a result. But in such a case, religion is but one way of doing this and certainly not the only way, and in any case fundamentally it is an illusion. I once watched a television show (SBS Australia, January 28, 2013, entitled “Fear And Faith”), conducted by a well-known atheist illusionist, Derren Brown. I have mentioned him before. He was very good at his job which was to create illusions in the minds of observers and participants. Belief in God, for Derren Brown, was an illusion. So he proceeded to prove his point by setting out to manipulate a young fellow-atheist (a researcher of stem cells) into having a “religious conversion.” This young woman was manifestly an open, friendly and warm communicator, which is to say one who

fully took in all that was conveyed to her. She declared herself to be an atheist, and could not imagine herself believing in God. Brown presented himself to her as one who would discuss her basic outlook on life. She did not realize what he was up to. So the interview began, and the atheist Brown, an expert illusionist, gave himself about fifteen to twenty minutes to induce in the young atheist a religious conversion. All this was on camera, but it did not seem as if the young woman knew that all was being recorded. So the session began, relaxed and calm.

Through a variety of simple techniques which were silently explained to the viewers as the session proceeded, the young atheist was led to have trust in Brown, to review her life and to see a unity, a plan, in the events of her young life. Was this not a loving Providence? Brown was presenting in simple and persuasive manner the kinds of considerations which, in standard methods of conversion to belief in God, can issue (in some persons) in precisely that result. He was also employing various supporting psychological techniques which would trigger emotions of

awe and religious feeling — such as a tapping with his finger at certain points of his simple presentation. The ideas he was presenting to her were exactly those which a religiously convinced person would state and know to be true. Further, the young atheist, profoundly communicable and impressionable as was obvious, was taking it all in. After about ten minutes of this skilful leading on of his young interviewee, Brown explained that he would leave her for a few minutes as he had to attend to something — and there she was left before the camera for us all to see. Within a minute or so, she was engulfed in emotion and tears, and at a subsequent interview in front of many persons she explained that she had had an experience of unconditional love. It was a “religious conversion” — which is to say that the atheist illusionist had induced, he thought, a religious illusion in a fellow atheist. Brown proceeded to explain to the young woman what he had done, and ended the program happily declaring that he had proved his point that religion is, well, a good thing because it makes people happy. But that is all that it is. There is

nothing out there that pertains to the Supernatural. A few things occurred to me as I watched this interesting session. Firstly, Derren Brown may have unwittingly helped his atheist acquaintance *to discover God*, for he was presenting to her what any religious person would know to be true. They were actually *truths*, though from his point of view Brown was using them to prove them to be illusions. But what the young woman lacked was, despite her own scientific background, *justification* for her new “religious” impressions. She was at the mercy of a skilled illusionist. A *justification* — a good, objective rationale — was what she needed. Her case showed that *justification* is necessary.

Religion, which is to say a life founded on belief in the unseen God, cannot be just a matter of religious impressions, experiences and emotions. It will involve this, but it also involves *reasons* and objective *justification*. This is not the same as scientific or mathematical justification, for there are different kinds of justification for different kinds of truths. The most ordinary of persons can

possess absolutely *good reasons* for accepting the fact of God and the tenets of revealed religion, without having a Ph.D in religious or philosophical studies. Indeed, the Ph.Ds are the ones — like Derren Brown (if he has one) — who commonly go astray. But we must indeed in some sense use our *reason* to be sure of the objective truth of religion. Religion involves *truth*: the truth of the unseen God in whose presence we are called to live constantly. If we live in his presence constantly, our “yes” will indeed be “yes”, as our Lord requires of all (Matthew 5:37).



The Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 27 (26):7, 9 O Lord, hear my voice, for I have called to you; be my help. Do not abandon or forsake me, O God, my Saviour!

Collect O God, strength of those who hope in you, graciously hear our pleas, and, since without you mortal frailty can do nothing, grant us always the help of your grace, that in following your commands we may please you by our resolve and our deeds. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Exodus 19:2-6a; Psalm 100:1-3, 5;
Romans 5:6-11; Matthew 9:36-10:8

When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his

harvest field. He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. (Matthew 9:36-10:8)

Difficulty God is all-powerful, infinitely wise and all-knowing. That is what has been revealed, and to a point we can work this out. Now, one of the features of revealed doctrine is that many of its central components are beyond the power of human understanding. For instance

— apart from truths such as there being one divine Being and yet three divine Persons — consider God’s *infinity*. God’s “infinity” involves the denial of all limitation in any feature of the pure Being that God is. While we can follow this denial of any limitation, it is another matter to grasp how this is to be understood in relation to God’s concrete action. Yes, God is infinite in power, wisdom and holiness. But in terms of his concrete action, how is it that the all-powerful God doesn’t seem to get many obviously good things done? If you were a big hulk of a fellow and you saw a person of moderate size beating up a helpless lady, would you not spring into action and prevent that assailant from doing harm? You would be able to prevent it because of your size and strength. You had the power, and if you did not do it then it would mean that you did not have other equally important qualities such as right moral instincts and ordinary wisdom. What, then, is the all-powerful God doing when harm is being done to innocent people? What is he doing in allowing a Hitler, a Stalin or a Pol Pot to seize power and proceed to wreak havoc among

the peoples? I am not presenting the divine allowance of evil as an objection against the fact of God — it is a point of difficulty in *understanding* God's power and goodness. Or take another form of this — consider simply the doing of good. There is so much good intended by various people. There are so many good things that could be done, were there the power to do them. But what we normally find is that this doing of good is a slow and arduous work, taking time and enduring many obstacles. Granted that there *is* a good, all-powerful Creator, why does he not provide the wherewithal to get the good things done rapidly? That such things are within his power is manifest from, say, the miracles of Jesus Christ. Jesus was once out in a boat with his disciples and because of his tremendous exertions, was exhausted in sleep in the boat. During his deep and undisturbed sleep, the boat was in imminent danger of going down because of the raging storm. His disciples shook him awake, he rose and at a word reduced the storm to absolute calm. Could not the infinite God be enabling more good to be done with this kind of ease?

All this brings us to our Gospel today (Matthew 9:36-10:8), and in particular to one feature of it. We read that *“When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”* Christ saw the crowds and had compassion on them because they were suffering. Well, why did he not fix it all up there and then with one mighty act of power? God became man and walked the earth as our Brother — why was he not a “brother” to us by getting rid of all the hard things in life, and make of this world a much, much more pleasant place where the crowds would not be so harassed and helpless? We notice that he appealed to his disciples to pray to the Lord of the harvest to send more workers into the harvest — but why was this necessary? Could not the divine power which Jesus Christ possessed answer that need too, and at a stroke? That he had divine power is clear because he thereupon proceeded to bestow a

share of it on his disciples: “*As you go, preach this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven is near.’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.*” Well now, in regard to these problems consider this. One of the things that is manifest in the divine plan revealed in and by Jesus Christ is that God does not dispense with the laws and limits of creation. God became man, and this meant respecting the human condition with its limitations. As Jesus Christ hung from the Cross his enemies jeered at him. *If you are the Son of God, come down from the Cross.* He could have done this but he did not. It was not the plan of God to do things in what we think to be the quick and best way. While he gives many signs of his power and goodness by suspending the laws of creation — such as curing some lepers and raising some who are dead — this is not the usual way God works to make the world a better and holier place. When Christ’s enemies demanded a sign from heaven, he sighed from the heart and left them to go elsewhere. When his enemies picked up stones with which

to stone him he did not disable them by an exercise of his divine power. Rather he hid from them and made his escape.

The laws and course of our fallen world and of the ordinary life are *not* typically suspended to attain the divine goals. Good is done, evil is resisted, and sanctity is attained, *within this broken world*. The plan of God is manifestly to bring immense good, good of eternal significance, out of the evil that presses down on all — including the good man. Jesus Christ is the exemplar of what is to be expected and aspired for in life. Let us never be disillusioned by the sadness and frustration of life — let our model when faced with suffering, with evil, and with the difficulty of doing good things, be Jesus Christ. His great work was accomplished precisely in suffering, difficulty and frustration. Let us work as Christ wanted his disciples to work, ever praying that the Lord of the harvest will send more labourers into his harvest.



Monday of the eleventh week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 27 (26):7, 9 O Lord, hear my voice, for I have called to you; be my help. Do not abandon or forsake me, O God, my Saviour!

Collect O God, strength of those who hope in you, graciously hear our pleas, and, since without you mortal frailty can do nothing, grant us always the help of your grace, that in following your commands we may please you by our resolve and our deeds. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Kings 21:1-16; Ps 5; Matthew 5:38-42

Jesus said to his disciples: You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go

with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.
(Matthew 5:38-42)

Scripture When I was a child two people representing a vacuum cleaning company came to the door of our home selling vacuum cleaners. I remember how effective as a salesman one of them was — through his persuasive words he had himself admitted into our living room to give a demonstration of a vacuum cleaner. He had mastered his technique. That was one case of door-to-door selling. Another common case is of representatives of religious bodies coming to the door to introduce and sell their doctrines. As with any reputable salesmen, they also have usually mastered their technique. The religious persons I am thinking of come two-by-two and are armed with a thoroughly prepared presentation of some Scriptural verses. In some instances they gain great victories, especially if they arrive when the host, an orthodox Christian — say, a Catholic — has been going through a difficult and vulnerable time. The aim of the visitors may

be to convert the host from his belief that the man Jesus Christ is God, and to help him see that the person of Jesus is an entity separate from the Godhead. After all (they point out), Jesus said, “*why do you call me good? No-one is good, but God alone*” (Mark 10:18). Other *single* texts are used by them to convert their listeners to this or that doctrine. The host interlocutor may not at that moment be feeling up to a narrow academic argument, and may not be particularly well-versed in the Scriptural sentences being suddenly flung at him. But of course, what shapes the visitors’ understanding of certain Scriptural texts is not an impartial study of the text itself, but the religious authority they have accepted and the tradition they have embraced. In the case of, say, two Jehovah’s Witnesses, it is the Governing Body of Jehovah’s Witnesses at the religion’s Brooklyn headquarters, and the Scriptural and doctrinal teaching disseminated by their periodical, *The Watchtower*. What are in conflict during their engagement with the host are two opposite authorities: each with its tradition and understanding of the Bible. The sect represented by the

two religious devotees claims, in effect, a much more extensive gift of Infallibility in respect to the details of the Scriptural texts than anything ever claimed by the Successor of St Peter himself.

What I am saying here is that any religion which gives great authority to a Book must be alert to the dangers of misinterpretation. Any text must be *interpreted*, however inspired the text may be in its authorship. The Catholic Church — obviously the greatest of the Christian Churches — has pronounced but sparsely on the interpretation of textual details of the Bible. It has an extensive dogmatic teaching, but Scripture is generally allowed to speak for itself. Each reader must bear in mind the context of a particular verse and the drift of teaching in the entire Bible. But all of this is to be understood in the context of revealed truth as set forth in the *doctrinal* teaching of the Church. A fairly well instructed Catholic will be able to read the inspired pages with great profit. Still, there will be many things he may never understand, for their meanings may always be the object of dispute among reputable Scripture

scholars. An occasional breakthrough could come here and there, casting light on a difficult book of the Bible. For instance, a scholar may present his hypothesis that the Book of Revelation at the end of the New Testament is primarily a liturgical book and is to be interpreted in the light of the Eucharist. That is to say, it is a kind of allegory of the celebration of the Holy Mass. The Wedding Feast of the Lamb, the Supper of the Lamb as in the Book of Revelation, is being played out before us every time we participate in the celebration of the Eucharist. This viewpoint is very explanatory, and gains a wide acceptance. But then a persuasive counter-proposal appears some time later — and all this discussion is good. They are broad views which, based on the Church's dogmatic teaching, view the Scriptures as a whole and throw light on the interpretation of particular texts. In our Gospel passage today (Matthew 5:38-42), our Lord directs that *“If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.”* Does our Lord

mean this *literally*? It is fair question because when our Lord himself was struck with a blow on his face during his trial, with restraint and dignity he asked his assailant to give an explanation of this injustice. He did not invite him to strike him on the other cheek as well (John 18: 21-23).

Indeed, to have *encouraged* that person to continue striking unjustly (by silence) may even have been tantamount to encouraging him to continue sinning. Our Lord was *correcting* him — something he urges his disciples to do in the life of the Church when their brother sins publicly (Matthew 18: 15-22). The directive of our Gospel today is to be understood with the mind of the Church, and in the context of the teachings of Scripture generally. The response to violence is not to be vengeful — an eye for an eye — but is to incline towards Christ-like forgiveness and magnanimity: “*Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.*” With this balance of interpretation, let us immerse ourselves in the Scriptures, and especially in the Gospels.

Second reflection: (Matthew 5:38-42)

The charity of Christ There is in the modern world a constant discussion of human rights and of justice — and this is very good, for there can be no love without justice. If love is our ideal as Christians, justice is a precondition. But notwithstanding all our talk of rights, of justice and of duties to others, our Lord expects that we go much further still. He speaks of forgiveness, mercy, loving one's enemies, and of our virtue being much deeper than that of the scribes and the Pharisees. An insistence on mere justice can fail to resolve conflict among men. In today's Gospel our Lord says that instead of demanding an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, "*if anyone hits you on the right cheek, offer the other as well.*" Of course, our Lord is making his point graphically, and with typical Hebraic hyperbole. We are to be generous in the face of

evil and to overcome evil not just with justice, but with the mind of Christ.

St Paul says in one of his letters, “*Let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.*” Let us endeavour to be like Christ in the face of evil and unreasonable demands on us. In this way will we overcome evil. It will not be done simply by demanding justice.



Tuesday of the eleventh week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 27 (26):7, 9 O Lord, hear my voice, for I have called to you; be my help. Do not abandon or forsake me, O God, my Saviour!

Collect O God, strength of those who hope in you, graciously hear our pleas, and, since without you mortal frailty can do nothing, grant us always the help of your grace, that in following your commands we may please you by our resolve and our deeds. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Kings 21:17-29; Ps 50; Matthew 5:43-48

Jesus said, You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love

you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5: 43-48)

Love A most important aspect of the mission of the Church — meaning, the mission of each and every member of the Church — is the evangelization not just of individuals in the world, nor just the evangelization of societies and peoples, but the evangelization of *culture*. Every culture has its prevailing ethos, its unspoken assumptions, its distinctive aspirations, its special way of doing things, its preferences, its spirit. These are what constitute the founts of culture, and the modern secular view has regarded religion as a *fruit* of culture, and a poor — even somewhat rotten — fruit at that. Christopher Dawson (1889—1970) was perhaps the most reflective English-speaking Catholic historian of the twentieth century. He never ceased to affirm the fundamental importance of religion to civilization. As he wrote in 1925,

the “*great civilizations of the world do not produce the great religions as a kind of cultural by product; in a very real sense the great religions are the foundations on which the great civilizations rest.*” From his historical work, he drew the lesson that religious faith is the spark of culture, and external material success will not survive its being extinguished. Just before he ascended into Heaven, Christ charged the Eleven to make disciples of all the nations (Matthew 28:19). *Nations*, and not just individuals, are to become disciples of Christ. It implies that the cultures of nations are to be evangelized. This means bringing the Person and teaching of Jesus Christ to the very foundations of national and social thought. The Person and revelation of Christ is to be the basis of cultural thought — and the Church has been successful in this mission in the past. It was well on the way to evangelizing Roman civilization when the Roman world fell to the barbarians in the fifth and sixth centuries. Then the evangelization of the barbarian conquerors began, and this culminated in the emergence of Christian Europe. The Church has called on

her members to begin a new evangelization of culture and civilization comparable to that which was achieved in previous ages. Nations with their cultures can be evangelized, with the aid of the all-powerful Spirit of God working through Christ's disciples.

However, there is a danger that a culture, once evangelized in a general sense, can be thought to do its work almost automatically. It can be assumed that people whose culture is thus evangelised will be carried along by their Christian culture to follow Christ and his Church authentically. Now, there is no doubt that a Christian culture is an immense help to the Christian life of a nation's members, just as there is no doubt that an anti-Christian culture, or a religiously indifferent and secular culture, can be a great obstacle to the flourishing of the Christian life of a society's members. We are supported or undermined, as the case may be, by the thought and ideas of others and of society. Nevertheless, culture alone will not bring personal holiness. Apart from the grace of God, there must be ignited in each individual

the resolve to seek holiness of life in Christ and according to his teaching. A culture may, through the persevering efforts of the Church's members, become Christian and Catholic, but each individual must also be evangelized, formed and set on the path of holiness. The Christian life is not just a social and national matter — though in the modern secular world, the very idea of a Christian culture and society is largely rejected. What is fundamental is that each individual know and love Jesus Christ in his own mind and heart, as a matter of personal choice. Culture may support this, it may ignore it, or it may be hostile to it. Whatever be the case, the personal choice for Christ and love for him must not depend on culture, which is to say, on the society within which one is living. It is a very personal choice, and it involves a radical decision to go the whole way with Jesus Christ. Love is above all a decision, and the decision is to take up one's cross every day and follow in the footsteps of the Master along the path of perfection. The greatest deficiency within Christ's faithful is always the failure to hear and take up this call to

personal perfection. It is a moral and spiritual perfection, the perfection of love for Jesus. There are many temptations enticing Christ's disciples away from such a path, all summarized in the threefold caption: the world, the flesh and the devil. Those who take up the call can still fall away from it — through succumbing to bad example, spiritual sloth, gratification, whatever.

In our Gospel today (Matthew 5: 43-48), our Lord sets us a very high standard — we are not just to put up with our enemies, not even just to forgive them, but we are to love them. Love your enemies! Our standard ought be the love that fills the heart of God our heavenly Father. We are to seek the perfection of love, love modelled after that of God, and sharing in it by his gift of grace. *“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.”* Our efforts to attain this ought to be unabated. *“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect”* (Mt. 5: 43-48).

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Second reflection:

The poverty of God God's wealth is unlimited and is so from all eternity. The richness of his being is infinite. St Paul tells that Christ "*was rich, but he became poor for your sake, to make you rich out of his poverty*" (2 Corinthians 8: 9). St Paul writes elsewhere that Christ did not cling to his glory as one equal to God, but put it aside and became as we are, and even lowlier than that. This, then, is the character of true greatness. It does not consist in the mere possession of many things. Our Lord pointed to himself: "*the Son of man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for the many.*"

Let us make that our ultimate norm. This is the mind of Christ which we are called to put on. It is to be lived out after the manner of Mary and Joseph, in the loving fulfilment of the unnoticed duties of every ordinary day.



Wednesday of the eleventh week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 27 (26):7, 9 O Lord, hear my voice, for I have called to you; be my help. Do not abandon or forsake me, O God, my Saviour!

Collect O God, strength of those who hope in you, graciously hear our pleas, and, since without you mortal frailty can do nothing, grant us always the help of your grace, that in following your commands we may please you by our resolve and our deeds. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Kings 2:1.6-14; Psalm 30;
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Jesus said to his disciples: Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and

on the streets, to be honoured by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. When you fast, do not look sombre as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18)

Divine reward There is a profound difference between the secular and the religious outlook. By “the secular outlook” I mean a view of the world which regards this world as being all that there is. It holds that there may, for all we know, be a life after death in some sense. But to all intents and purposes, this world is all that matters. Further, and intimately related to this, is the view that the world is nothing more than a *fact* — it does not have an *ultimate* moral significance. That is to say, what goes on in the world will not be held to any *ultimate* account. There will be no *ultimate* “rewards” or “punishments” — all that happens in the world will run to a natural end, and that will be the end of the business. Looking on the world as a whole, as, let us say, an observer from outer space, secular man understands what he sees as complete in itself, however satisfactory or unsatisfactory the picture before him may be. He looks on the world as a great fact to be improved as best as can be, and once the great fact has gone, there is nothing more to it. There is no divine Judgement on the world and its inhabitants, for instance. It

is plain that this is a profoundly opposite perspective on things from that view which sees the world as actually dwarfed by the Supernatural. In the religious perspective, what is not seen is greater far than what is seen. The great unseen reality is above all the Creator, the great being we call God. He enfolds the universe and all that is seen in his almighty grasp, and everything that is or happens is essentially and immediately related to Him who is the Creator of all. That is to say, there is absolutely nothing seen which is “complete in itself.” There is absolutely nothing that is *just there*, as if it is *all* that is there. This also means that the world is not just a fact without ultimate moral significance, because everything will be held to a final account. Man is the pinnacle and crown of the visible world, and he leads and drags the world after him in what he chooses to do. All of his choices will be subject to the judgment of God, and thus the world he has shaped by his choices will be affected by that divine judgment. The world is not just a fact. It is a fact suffused with moral significance, and this means that facing the world there

constantly looms the vast shadow of future bliss and/or future degradation.

Reward and punishment face the world which we see. By “the world we see” I mean, above all, man who leads and shapes it. The world is man’s home, and before the totality of the seen, there looms the judgment of the One who is unseen. Everything depends on him, on him whom we cannot see. Everything man does will attract its reward or its punishment, down to his least deed, his least chosen word, his least deliberate thought. How grand is the life of man, then! Everything is of maximum importance! Nothing is a mere, indifferent fact! Nothing is like the pebble which, when thrown in the river, disappears without a trace. Everything in the world and in the life of the most insignificant man or woman matters. It is all played out before the gaze of the almighty Judge, and when it has run its course, that will not be the end of the matter. Reward and punishment have yet to come. So it is that we see our Lord in the Gospels constantly referring to the judgment of God — and so we see him referring to “reward” in our

passage today. *“Be careful not to do your ‘acts of righteousness’ before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.”* If you do things in order to be praised by men and not in order to please God, then God will not reward you. You will have “no reward” from him (Matthew 6:1). So your secret thoughts, what you intend, your choice of goals — even if you do not attain those goals — is no mere fact which comes and goes along the stream of other facts, disappearing when it has run its course. It has an ultimate moral significance which will come home to roost. It will be recalled, considered, judged. It will have an eternal significance, for it will be rewarded or punished as the case may be. God sees, and he will remember. The books will be opened, and what has happened will be seen therein. *“When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”* We are reminded by these words that at the heart of the good action, the action which

will attract a divine reward, is the intent to do what will please God. It is this which gives eternal significance and value to all that we do.

The most ordinary person can transform his life from being what seems a mere brute fact to a flower of great beauty and undying significance. Let him do his ordinary things — as he must in any case — but with the noble intent of pleasing God his Father in heaven, in union with Jesus Christ his Brother and Saviour, and by the grace of the Holy Spirit his Sanctifier. That is what we must do. We must do all with the intention of pleasing God, in whose presence we live and move and have our being. Let us do this as from now! So then, now I begin!

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Second reflection:

Faith A fair degree of time and effort is spent on ensuring security for the future — and that is good. We have various forms of superannuation and life insurance,

and we take other steps to ensure future security. But this preoccupation can reach the point of inhibiting our assistance to the poor. St Paul tells us that God loves a cheerful giver, and that God *“will make sure that you will always have all you need for yourselves in every possible circumstance, and still have something, to spare for all sorts of good works.”* He continues, *“The one who provides seed for the sower and bread for food will provide you with all the seed you want and make the harvest of your good deeds a larger one”* (2 Corinthians 9:7-10).

If we are to take this teaching to heart, we need to have faith in God’s power and love, and love our brothers accordingly. On one occasion after our Lord insisted on faith, a person said to him, *“Lord, I do believe. Help my unbelief.”* Let us ask our Lord for the grace to believe in his loving and all-powerful care, enabling us to serve our brothers and to help them in their need — without that anxiety for ourselves that can stifle a generous charity.



Thursday of the eleventh week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 27 (26):7, 9 O Lord, hear my voice, for I have called to you; be my help. Do not abandon or forsake me, O God, my Saviour!

Collect O God, strength of those who hope in you, graciously hear our pleas, and, since without you mortal frailty can do nothing, grant us always the help of your grace, that in following your commands we may please you by our resolve and our deeds. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ecclesiasticus 48:1-15; Psalm 96;

Matthew 6:7-15

Jesus said to his disciples: When you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. This, then, is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our trespasses, as we also forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.’ For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matthew 6:7-15)

The Lord’s Prayer I remember when Pope Paul VI was dying in early August of 1978, it was mentioned that the last prayer on his lips was the Lord’s Prayer — as I recall it, he died while saying the Lord’s Prayer in Latin. As Pope John Paul II described him early in his first Encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), Paul VI was a great Pope, and he referred to him as truly his “father.” Forty one years after his death, Paul VI was canonised a saint of the Church. What that news item about Pope Paul’s last moments suggested to me was the simplicity of his prayer. He was a man of profound prayer and had been this all his life — and he ended his life saying the Lord’s

Prayer. A great deal has been written on prayer by the Church's saints and theologians, and the Church herself has an extensive doctrinal teaching on it. For instance, the *Catechism of the Council of Trent for Parish Priests* (CCTPP), issued by Pope St Pius V some time after the final session of the Council of Trent, is divided into four parts — the Creed, the Sacraments, the Commandments and then Prayer. Introduced with a twenty-three page teaching on Prayer in general, the remainder of the Catechism's section on Prayer takes the form, very appropriately, of an authoritative commentary on the Lord's Prayer. This official book, the *Catechism* (CCTPP) of Pius V, was used for preaching and catechesis for the next four hundred years till its successor was published by Pope John Paul II, entitled *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), a wonderfully rich statement of the Church's teaching. As Pius V's *Catechism* (CCTPP) followed the Council of Trent, so the new *Catechism* (CCC) followed the Second Vatican Council. The point to be noticed, though, is that in the new book, once again the

Church presented a formal body of teaching on Prayer. As had been the case with the *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) was divided into the four sections of Creed, Sacraments, Commandments and Prayer. Christ's faithful have plenty of authoritative material to study and embrace in understanding that fundamental feature of religion, and in particular of the Christian religion, which is the life of prayer. So important is this, that it is hard to see how a person can be saved without prayer, especially if prayer is knowingly discounted or rejected.

The mere fact that the Church gives such space to Prayer, the same amount as she gives to Creed, Sacraments and Commandments, shows the immense importance of Prayer in the life of the faithful. Further, the fact that she chooses to structure her teaching on Prayer in the form of a commentary on the Lord's Prayer of the Gospels shows how important is the Gospel text providing us with this teaching of our Lord. Because the passage is brief and simply stated in passing amid many other things in the

Gospel, we might be tempted to pass it by, somewhat. We could be tempted to count it simply among the many texts of Scripture which present us with inspired prayers. There are all the psalms, so beautiful, encapsulating so much of the Scriptures. There are such prayers as those in the Book of Tobit, or the Book of Daniel, or many of the prayers of Abraham, the Patriarchs, Moses, David and the Prophets. The Lord's Prayer is not the only prayer of Christ recorded in the Gospels. Our Lord addresses his heavenly Father on other occasions — such as when he blesses his heavenly Father for revealing these things to little ones and not to the clever. He addresses his heavenly Father just before raising Lazarus from the dead, and then there is his long prayer to his heavenly Father at the Last Supper, as recorded by John. With so many indications in the Scriptures as to how we are to pray, the Lord's Prayer as given to us in today's Gospel text (Matthew 6:7-15), might be easily passed by as being brief, simple, and perhaps not worth a lot of notice. But the Church thinks otherwise, and gives to our text an immense importance, making it the

basis of her teaching to Christ's faithful. So we ought treasure the Lord's Prayer with the utmost love. It is enshrined in the Church's liturgy, being prayed by the priest celebrating Mass, and all the faithful with him, following the Eucharist Prayer and beginning the Communion Rite. It is prayed by the Priest when he administers the Sacrament of Baptism and the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. It is prayed at the beginning of every decade of the Rosary. It ought be the basis of our prayer all through life, and Pope Paul VI gave the entire Church an example by his dying with this prayer on his lips. Let us follow that example in life.

The Lord's Prayer is one of the simplest prayers ever devised, and it comes from the lips of God the Son made man. We have it from Jesus Christ in direct response to a request that he teach his disciples how to pray. Let us not, then, succumb to the very real temptation of treating it glibly and very casually. Let us look on it as a most sacred prayer, one containing riches which we shall certainly not exhaust in our limited and uncertain lifetime. Let us pray it

fervently every day, many times every day, in union with our one great Intercessor and High Priest Jesus Christ, together with his body the Church, the Church of the ages. It will take us to heaven.

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Second reflection:

The Spouse of Christ St Paul describes the relationship the Christian has with Christ in terms of a marriage. He writes to the Corinthians that “*I arranged for you to marry Christ so that I may give you away to this one husband*” (2 Corinthians 11:2). We are, then, Christ’s spouse. Our relationship with our Lord is one of mutual undying love. And yet, he writes, we can be seduced and corrupted and turned away from simple devotion to Christ by those who proclaim “a new Jesus” — which is to say, a new doctrine about him. Our “marriage” to Christ the Bridegroom must be carefully guarded and protected

against false doctrine coming from sources other than the Teaching Church. There is a rich biblical background for understanding our relationship with Christ in marital terms. Within the Old Testament prophetic tradition, notably in Hosea, Yahweh describes himself as the Husband of his people, and his people as his spouse — an unfaithful one, all too often. Our Lord referred to himself as the bridegroom, as did St John the Baptist when speaking of Jesus to his disciples.

Let us make this profoundly beautiful truth a living reality in our lives.



Friday of the eleventh week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 27 (26):7, 9 O Lord, hear my voice, for I have called to you; be my help. Do not abandon or forsake me, O God, my Saviour!

Collect O God, strength of those who hope in you, graciously hear our pleas, and, since without you mortal frailty can do nothing, grant us always the help of your grace, that in following your commands we may please you by our resolve and our deeds. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Kings 11:1-4.9-18.20; Psalm 131;
Matthew 6:19-23

Jesus said, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure

is, there your heart will be also. The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness! (Matthew 6: 19-23)

Duty If a chair breaks, you get out a few tools and apply them to the task, and the chair is fixed. The object is restored to its proper condition, even to a better condition than it had previously, by applying in skilful fashion various forms of selective, physical pressure. If a person has a headache, that person may take this or that medication and the chemical effect of the substance will answer the physical or biological deficiency causing the headache. Many psychiatrists have extensive recourse to chemical medication in treating the personal disorders of their patients. The pills may sedate, and this alone could go a long way towards healing. Again, a Cardiprin aspirin tablet is taken daily to forestall cardiac problems — it is, we might say, an external cause acting on a passive subject, and it has the effect of maintaining physical health. A

person is exhausted from his work, and he takes two weeks off to holiday beside the sea. The combination of new and pleasant sights, the congenial environment, the physical activity, all converge on the subject and combine to effect a restoration of health. Of course there is a subjective action at work here too, but broadly we could say that these are examples of health and restoration being effected by external factors acting on the subject in causal fashion. But in the case of the human being, there is a higher kind of health, a more basic form of flourishing, which is not the mere result of a passive openness to wholesome external influences. I refer to the effect on himself of the subject knowing and wanting what is objectively right. If a person contemplates doing an action which is morally evil, and, perceiving its evil, proceeds to do it, that person will fail as a person. A notable decline will set in. Man, if he is to be healthy in the best sense, must *strive to be good*. The better a man is precisely in his moral life and constitution, the happier, more wholesome and flourishing as a person he will be. This flourishing and wholesomeness as a

person will depend on his moral choices. If he sees someone in need, and does nothing to help him when he can, then at a deeper level of health he begins to deteriorate. A principle of weakness has set in and he is on the path to personal decay.

While the plant thrives in response to environment — granted, of course, the inner propensities of the seed — and is more or less the product of environment, the case is different with man. His true condition is the result primarily of his choices. In this sense, he is the result of what he chooses to know, want and do. Paradoxically, he may flourish by giving up his very life for some good, if this is the result of a choice for what is morally good. Man's fundamental context, his most basic environment, is moral obligation. He finds himself with not just facts before him, facts that bear on him and cause him to flourish or decline. Rather, his most basic experience, his fundamental environment in which he finds himself, is that of moral obligation. He looks out before him and sees presented before him the imperious call of duty. This is a

primary experience of reality, and it leaves him free. He can choose to do what he perceives he ought to do — which includes what he ought to think and say — or he can choose not to do it. This very choice will make or break him. It is not the external world that makes or breaks him but his own choice, even — and perhaps especially — if the external world crushes him because of his choice to do his duty. St Thomas More, under arrest for refusing to acknowledge King Henry VIII's new claims, saw that, as a result, he was heading to his death. He exclaimed, "Son Roper, I thank Our Lord, the field is won!" His choice set him on the path to true fulfilment — and simultaneously to death! He flourished as a man, not because the influences around him were to his liking or suitable to his temperament and personality, but because he chose what was objectively right. This choice led to his death and simultaneously to his highest fulfilment. This is the grandeur of man and a distinguishing difference from all other living things. As he chooses in response to duty, so he flourishes or declines. All of this brings us to our

Gospel today (Matthew 6: 19-23), in which our Lord says, *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.”* Eternal life is this, our Lord states in his prayer to his heavenly Father at the Last Supper, *to know you Father and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.* Again elsewhere: *It is not those who say to me, Lord, Lord, who will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.* These plain teachings of Jesus Christ remind us all that, granted the gift of God’s grace, we must become self-made persons. That is to say, our eternity, our happiness as human beings, our truest prospects, depend not on good fortune, or this or that circumstance, but on my own personal *choice* to pursue the path of duty — that duty which is made manifest in the word of Jesus Christ. Let us seek to know his word as it comes in the teaching of the Church, then, and with the aid of grace to do it.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 6:19-23)

“The lamp of the body is the eye” Cardinal Newman often made the point in his writings that the problem with the thinking of so many people was not their logic but their starting points, which is to say their underlying assumptions. Our Lord spoke of the eye being the lamp of the body. The eye lights up the body with its light — which is to say, with what it sees. It casts light into the body from outside, as it were. It is the window of the body which allows light into the room. If this lamp of the body is diseased, all will be in darkness. If the way we see things is deformed by false and sinful assumptions, then our whole life will be cast into darkness. Pope Benedict XVI repeatedly made the point that western culture is under the dictatorship of relativism. Truth is considered as relative to the knower, and this throws all into darkness. So then, let our light, our starting point, be that of Christ, coming to us from his Oracle, the Church.



Saturday of the eleventh week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 27 (26):7, 9 O Lord, hear my voice, for I have called to you; be my help. Do not abandon or forsake me, O God, my Saviour!

Collect O God, strength of those who hope in you, graciously hear our pleas, and, since without you mortal frailty can do nothing, grant us always the help of your grace, that in following your commands we may please you by our resolve and our deeds. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Chronicles 24:17-25; Psalm 86;
Matthew 6:24-34

Jesus said to his disciples: “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Mammon. Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or

about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. (Matthew 6: 24-34)

Do not worry The prudent man counts the cost, and then makes his move. One man, seeing it advertised that a pilgrimage to the Holy Land has been arranged, makes an inquiry because he would like to go. He receives the brochures and considers his position. He realizes that his close cousin is in precarious health and wonders what will happen if, while he is on the pilgrimage far from his own country, she suddenly falls gravely ill. He makes his decision — he cannot go. Another is in a similar position and likewise weighs it up and decides that, well, there is a risk, but all things considered he is prepared to take it — and his sick relative wants him to go anyway. He too has considered the risks and has made his decision in all prudence. The fact is that man's situation is essentially contingent. There is nothing necessary about it. He is radically dependent on circumstances — his own health is dependent on factors that can easily change; his material security is contingent on a range of circumstances which could suddenly change — by floods, fire, malpractice, or whatever; his family happiness is dependent on many

things which, sadly, have been known to change. Children can become heartless, spouses can become estranged. Indeed, the whole universe, with man as its crown, is radically contingent in its very existence. It depends on the circumstance that the Creator continues to hold it lovingly in being. Whether he realizes it or not, man is nonchalantly on the knife-edge of life and existence, a situation which could so easily change in but a moment. Therefore, his essential situation is such that he must calculate what is best for him to do. All of this, at least in its practical bearing, is pretty well self-evident to the average person. There is this danger though, that a person can think — and modern secular man certainly tends to think — that all of one's calculation is to be done on the basis of what one can see. This is because all that there is, he thinks, is what one can see. There is only this world, so one must make one's calculations in the light of this world. All there is, is what can be directly experienced and tested empirically. Risks must be taken, but the risks are

calculated on the basis of what one can count on in this life. Counting on the things of this life, one takes the risk.

To a point, of course, all this is sheer prudence. One must calculate what to do on the basis of the circumstances of life. But if that is *all* that is being done, it is not really prudent at all. It is not taking *everything* into account, because the biggest factor of all is out of the picture. The biggest factor is a *loving Creator*. It is one of the greatest dangers of modern culture that the fact of a loving Creator will remain out of sight. This is the blind-spot of modern Western secularism. Let us consider Asia. For example, the absence of a loving Creator is also, it seems, a principal blind-spot of classic Buddhism. Again, Confucius did not offer a way to *God* as such — he offered a way to ethical human happiness in this life. The situation was not at all improved when, in the twentieth century, out of China there came the militant imposition of Communism — an atheistic idea imported from the West. What it all means is that the greatest lack in the modern world is the sense of the Unseen loving God, a God who loves man and his

creation with an incalculable love. It is precisely this which is left out of the calculation. It is this which is forgotten by modern calculating man, the man of successful pragmatism, the man of modern scientific, technical and material achievement. If a person is filled with a conviction of the reality of a loving Creator, a loving Creator who became man to save us from sin and death and to give us a share in his own eternal life, then obviously such a person will take greater risks in what he chooses to do. He can even risk his life by declaring that he believes in this loving Creator, when there are people who wish to stamp out this notion as being inimical to man's true, terrestrial interests. All of this brings us to our Gospel today (Matthew 6: 24-34), in which our Lord tells us, "*do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear.*" This is because our loving Creator will care for us. All we need worry about is the doing of his holy will. That is what comes first. That is what matters — over and above all our other needs. In fact, he says, if we do his holy will and seek his Kingdom

— which will include, of course, attending to our material needs — then he will look after us in the way he knows is best.

It is said that St Thomas Aquinas was once asked this question by his sister: *How can one become a saint?* Her illustrious brother replied — just *want* it! That is to say, it all gets down to desire and personal choice. But we worry about the cost and what we shall lose by it. We calculate the cost — as we should — and we decide that the risk of losing what is important is too great. But if we have faith in a loving Creator, manifest in Jesus Christ the Son, then it is not a risk at all. God will provide. As our Lord says, “*seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*”

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Second reflection:

Grace and man's weakness God has bestowed many gifts on us, and we look to the gifts people have as

being full of promise for their future. St Paul makes it clear that in his spiritual gifts he is just as endowed, and more so, than others. Things have been revealed to him that they, his critics, have not imagined. Yet he does not boast of that even though he could. His boast is in his weakness, and this is because Christ has told him that his grace is enough for him. *“My power is at its best in weakness”* (2 Corinthians 12: 9). He acknowledged his weaknesses before God and before others, and placed his faith in God’s grace and power. When we are especially conscious of our weaknesses, that is the golden moment to acknowledge the truth about ourselves and about God. God is all-powerful and can be trusted. When beset by abundant limitations, let us be content in that discontent, for God is all-powerful and can be trusted. *“Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong”* (2 Corinthians 12:10).



Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 28 (27):8-9 The Lord is the strength of his people, a saving refuge for the one he has anointed. Save your people, Lord, and bless your heritage, and govern them for ever.

Collect Grant, O Lord, that we may always revere and love your holy name, for you never deprive of your guidance those you set firm on the foundation of your love. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 20:10-13; Psalm 69:8-10, 14, 17, 33-35; Romans 5:12-15; Matthew 10:26-33

Jesus said to the Twelve: Do not be afraid of any one. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. Do not be afraid of those who kill

the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven. (Matthew 10:26-33)

In Hell

In any modern Western country, schemes for retirement constitute a thriving industry — and it would be remiss to neglect such planning. But of course, the very logic of this ought lead us to make provision not just for the years of retirement, but for the truly final stage which is *after we die*. Just as it would be tragic if due to culpable neglect our final years were full of unhappiness, even more so would it be tragic if due to culpable neglect our eternity were engulfed in misery. We know with the utmost certainty, on the word of Jesus Christ, that

ultimately there are but two alternatives for each of us. There will be either eternal happiness or unending despair. There will be either heaven or hell. We also know the path that leads to each of these, and so we are in a position to make an enlightened choice to ensure our eternal security. The way to life eternal is through Jesus Christ and the way to the loss of it is through deliberate separation from him. The thought of hell is appalling. Saint Theresa of Avila, doctor of the Church for her teachings on prayer, was granted by God to see in a vision her place in hell if she were not faithful. It was unforgettable. The children of Fatima were given a vision of hell — vast oceans of flame threw high and then received back the souls of the damned. The children were urged by our Lady to pray for sinners, especially those most in need of God's mercy. That prayer of the Angel is now said at the end of each decade of the Rosary. Yet in our secular culture numbers of people are not concerned that the revealed teaching on hell might just be true. They think little of the judgment of God. Our Lord in today's Gospel (Matthew 10:26-33) speaks of the

fear of being sent to hell. *“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; fear him rather who can destroy both body and soul in hell.”* Our whole being longs for love and in particular the love that only God can give. We were made for it, and it is attained fully, finally and immediately in Heaven. Hell is the eternal loss of this. It is a horror — the horror of all horrors.

Consider a member of a loving family who deliberately alienates himself from his family circle. Confirmed in his prideful separation, he is nevertheless profoundly unhappy and his years end in loneliness and misery. Or again, many who look back on their lives regret having lost various opportunities that came their way. Such experiences can give us a faint inkling of the enormity of the loss endured in Hell. Hell is an unending, eternal loss of the company and the sight of God for whom we were made, that God who has always loved us and who placed us within his own family. Hell is the realization that for all eternity one has lost all of this, and deliberately so. One has preferred in place of God sinful things that pass

away in a mere spark of passing time. The bitterness and the regret, the anguish of unending loneliness and hate, the resentment and bitterness against God and all those in heaven and against all those nearby in hell — all of this is unending. The most revolting aspect of hell is the unending hatred for God and all-consuming hatred for oneself. It will be a living death for ever and ever. Our Lord said of Judas that it would have been better if he had never been born. Scripture describes hell as an unending fire and the visions of hell that the saints have had have shown a great sea of fire, a burning sea that is surging with powerful fires, in which the damned are cast. It is a most graphic image. We need but think of the pain of the touch of fire on one's finger to have some inkling of an eternity in hell. Scripture describes hell as an eternal death. The soul is perishing forever, without actually passing out of existence. The soul is absolutely lost forever, never to be reclaimed, yet its deathly existence never ends. It is the greatest catastrophe imaginable, just as Heaven is the greatest blessing imaginable. Let all of us be warned. Hell

is one's lot if one dies in the state of deliberate and unrepented mortal sin. Every day we ought make a sincere act of repentance and contrition with a firm purpose of amendment. If it is permitted to us by virtue of our Catholic Faith, we ought regularly approach the Sacrament of Penance. We should keep alive in our hearts a fervent desire for sanctity. Moreover, we ought endeavour every day to save souls from hell, by conducting a personal and daily apostolate. It is the principal form of charity.

On the other hand, consider the soul that is saved. He dies in the state of grace, sorry for his sins, and hopefully having received the Sacraments of the Church. He may be far from perfect yet, so God will mercifully purify him of his sins — the Church calls this divine purification beyond the grave, Purgatory. Being a total purification which leaves the person finally holy and fit for God's presence, Purgatory is profoundly painful. It is the burning away of all marks of sin, but it is in one who has the joy of knowing for certain that he is saved. We can hasten the Purgatory of a departed person with Masses and

spiritual indulgences and prayers offered for him. Let us consider ourselves blessed to know of Purgatory, as we can, in view of it, make reparation in union with Christ for our sins while here on earth. We can also depend on our friends and the Church to pray for us after we have died. So many of the departed have no one to pray for them. Let us pray for them, then!

Further Reading: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*
no.1030 1036. (The final Purification, or Purgatory)



Monday of the twelfth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 28 (27):8-9 The Lord is the strength of his people, a saving refuge for the one he has anointed. Save your people, Lord, and bless your heritage, and govern them for ever.

Collect Grant, O Lord, that we may always revere and love your holy name, for you never deprive of your guidance those you set firm on the foundation of your love. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Kings 17:5-8.13-15.16; Psalm 59;
Matthew 7:1-5

Jesus said, Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way as you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own

eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. (Matthew 7:1-5)

Do not judge Early in May of 2011 a party of American commandos flew in helicopters from a base in Afghanistan to a compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. They landed in the compound, hastily overran it and found the terrorist leader Osama bin Laden, who was asked to surrender. It was said that in some sense he resisted, but it was later announced that he was *unarmed*. He was shot and killed, and the party left with a cache of computers and other seizures, together with the body which was buried at sea. In Australia there have occasionally been police incidents when a man with only a knife has been shot and killed by police who were there confronting him. There is then a major inquiry into the legality of the police action, with important recommendations. The police in question are extensively interviewed as are any witnesses, the body

is examined by a coroner, and a judgment is made. There have been cases of police shootings leading to the prosecution of the police themselves. I am not sure that there was a thorough investigation into the death of the mass murderer, Bin Laden. When certain persons are indicted for crimes against humanity, they are hunted down and brought to trial before legitimate courts and have the right to legal defence. This guards against unjust judgment and condemnation, something to which man is prone. One of the triumphs of American history was its eventual conquest of lynching. All countries where the rule of law is in place ban this practice, and require the prosecution of those guilty of it. There is no doubt about the guilt of Bin Laden, just as there was no doubt about the guilt of Pol Pot, and Adolf Hitler. But as already said, there was some doubt, I think, about the circumstances of his death. I mention this as an introduction to the sequel of Bin Laden's demise. Within a short time of President Barak Obama's announcement of the event, crowds were in the streets *celebrating*, and the next day a survey was

conducted by the CNN/Opinion Research Corporation. According to its poll, about 60 percent of the public thought Bin Laden was now in Hell, and the New York Daily News published a full front-page photo of Laden, with “Rot in Hell” as its headline. That is, they wanted him in Hell. Of course, this may have mainly signified that people thought Bin Laden an evil person, but it says other things too about man’s judgment on others.

I mention all this as an introduction to our Gospel today. On one occasion our Lord was informed by “*some who told him of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices*” (Luke 13:1). The deed was an atrocity — if done these days, Pilate may have been brought to trial for a crime against humanity. The same can be said of, say, Herod the Great — one of his darker exploits is recorded in the Gospel of St Matthew. He slaughtered several infants in the quiet settlement of Bethlehem so as to stamp out a future rival to his hoped-for dynasty. There are countless bad deeds done in this sin-laden and sorry world. But what does Jesus Christ say

about our response to evil? We are not to judge — not in respect to the person's action, but how he stands ultimately in God's sight and judgment. This is because only God knows. *“Jesus said, Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way as you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you”* (Matthew 7: 1-5). Our Lord is not saying that criminal actions and personal responsibility for them is not to be the object of civil or ecclesiastical judgment, indeed of the judgment of anyone who carries responsibility. But we must not — to give but one example — *consign a person to Hell*. When our Lord was hanging in total agony from the cross, he did not assign to hell his enemies who were jeering in derision before him. They had effected his lynching by blackmailing a harassed and fearful civil governor. It was the most horrible crime in the history of the world, for it was God become man who was thus murdered. Of course, all this was under the almighty hand of God and his loving providence. Our Lord was master of the events in the sense that he freely submitted to

the hostility directed against him. But he did not wish them the harm of hell, though he made clear, even to Pilate that “*the one who delivered me to you has the greater sin*” (John 19:11). He wanted them saved. On the cross Jesus prayed, “*Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing*” (Luke 23:34). St Peter, in his address after Pentecost, publicly stated: “*brothers, I know that you and your rulers acted from ignorance*” (Acts 3:17).

We can never know the full extent of consent for bad deeds done, so we must leave to the judgment of God a person’s ultimate guilt. We, rather, ought aim to think and act after the example of Jesus Christ. *Let this mind be in you, St Paul writes, that was in Christ Jesus.* The most fundamental revelation of the character and nature of God is that he is *holy* and therefore hateful of sin. But at the same time what is especially distinctive is that he is rich to overflowing in *mercy*. Let us, on this basis, pray for those who do us harm, and strive to win all men to God.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 7:1-5)

“Do not judge.” On one occasion our Lord told his disciples that if their virtue went no deeper than that of the Scribes and Pharisees — to whom people looked in matters of religion — then they would never enter the kingdom of heaven. The much higher virtue our Lord expects of us is instanced in our Gospel passage of today in which our Lord tells us that we ought not *judge* one another. What our Lord means by this is made clear in the sentences that follow. It means that we are not to *condemn*. Let us judge our brother kindly and not be constantly prone to criticise him for his defects. That is the tendency of our thoughts in respect to others. We ignore and forget our own defects, and condemn our brother for his. Our Lord says: take the log out of your own eye before you endeavour to take the splinter out of your brother’s eye.

Let us think for a moment of those in our life with whom we are constantly annoyed. Then let us apply our

Lord's teaching to ourselves, and let us resolve to put on the mind of Jesus Christ.



Tuesday of the twelfth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 28 (27):8-9 The Lord is the strength of his people, a saving refuge for the one he has anointed. Save your people, Lord, and bless your heritage, and govern them for ever.

Collect Grant, O Lord, that we may always revere and love your holy name, for you never deprive of your guidance those you set firm on the foundation of your love. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Kings 19:9-11.14-21.31-35.36;

Psalm 47; Matthew 7:6.12-14

Jesus said, Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces. So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. (Matthew 7:6.12-14)

Love for neighbour Matthew has obviously arranged his material in a certain way — as have each of the other Evangelists. At the beginning of our Lord's public ministry following his confrontation with Satan in the wilderness (4: 1-11), the commencement of his public ministry in Galilee (4: 12-17), his call of the first and principal Apostles (4:18-22) and his proclamation of the kingdom (4: 23-25), our Lord lays before his disciples his teaching (chapters 5-7). The section is a broad exposition of his revelation, and it is given to his disciples on the mountain in sight of the multitudes below (5:1). While this might indicate that what he says is directed to the disciples alone, at the end of his great discourse we read that "*the people were astonished at his doctrine, for he taught them as one having authority, and not like the scribes*" (7:28-29). Still, the beginning of the scene suggests that

Christ, seeing the multitudes, is telling his *disciples* the message they are to embrace in faith and then bring to the world below them. We are surely reminded of Moses who went up the mountain to receive the Law of God and then to bring it down to the multitudes below. Christ is the new Moses — the prophet Moses said would follow him. Yet in another sense, since it is he who is *giving* the new Law, and not just *receiving* it as did Moses on Mount Sinai, he is far more than another Moses. It was Yahweh who gave the Law to Moses to take to the people, and now *Christ* is giving the new Law and not just receiving it. We read in Exodus 24:1-2 that Moses was told, “*Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, with Nadab, Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel ... but Moses alone is to come close to the Lord; the others shall not come too near, and the people shall not come up at all with Moses.*” Then in 24:9 they go up according to that arrangement. In the scene of the Sermon on the Mount, with the multitudes below, Christ takes his seat up on the mountain — as would a great unrivalled teacher, and his disciples come to him to hear

his word. It is reminiscent of the various scenes of Mount Sinai in the Book of Exodus — with Christ depicted in one sense as the new Moses, and in another sense as far, far more than Moses. When he finishes, he comes down and the multitudes then follow him (8:1).

One of the obvious things our Lord does in his great discourse is that he draws various contrasts between what *he* says and what “*you have heard that it was said to the ancients*” (5:21). There are clear differences between what our Lord says and what “*you have heard that it was said*” (5:27). Now, let us be clear. Our Lord does not say, “*the Law and the Prophets say such and such,*” but *I* say this. This might even have suggested a setting aside of the Prophets, a kind of opposition between the Law and the Prophets and his own revelation. But he does not contradict the Law and the Prophets — he is full of love and veneration for them. Indeed, the entire Gospel of St Matthew is designed to show that our Lord’s mission and ministry is conducted on the basis of his being the very fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets. Our Lord did

various things precisely because the prophecies pointed to them. They expressed the divine will, the mission given to him by the Father, and choices were made by him in the light of them. To give but one example, in Matthew's account of Christ's final entry into the City in preparation for his Passion and Death, he directed two of his disciples to go to the village and bring the ass and her colt for his entry. We read that "*all this was done that it might be fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet, saying, tell the Daughter of Sion, behold your king comes to you seated upon an ass and a colt the foal of an ass*" (Matthew 21: 4-5). The prophecy, depicting the entry of the Messianic King, was for Christ the indicator to him of the will of his heavenly Father, and he acted accordingly. My point is that the Law and the Prophets were *loved and venerated* by Jesus Christ with all his heart as being the word of God his Father, revealed by the power and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Hence he says in the Sermon on the Mount, "*Do not think that I have come to destroy the law and the prophets — I have not come to destroy but to fulfil them*" (Matthew

5:17). It is in light of this that we ought notice our Lord's summation in our Gospel passage today: *"in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."*

One of the striking things about the revealed Judeo-Christian religion is the intimate connection between religion and life. God will not tolerate a worship of him that sits side-by-side with neglect of one's fellow-man. Christ fulfilled this superabundantly himself by laying down his life for the salvation of mankind, and he directed that his love for others be the benchmark for his disciples: Love one another as I have loved you (John 13:34). In this, as in so much else, he is the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets. Let us aim in life for love, then, the love of Christ coming to us by the Holy Spirit as his gift. This love is the path to human perfection.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 7:6.12-14)

“Enter by the narrow gate” One of the greatest dangers for the disciple of Jesus is that of falling into mediocrity. If the person of Jesus is loved, and if that love for him is truly real, there will be a holy ambition to be very generous. Our Lord tells us to “*enter by the narrow gate, since the road that leads to perdition is wide and spacious, and many take it; but it is a narrow gate and a hard road that leads to life.*” So then, every day will involve struggle and effort to do God’s will as perfectly as possible, if we hope to gain the prize of love for Jesus Christ. Struggle, ongoing daily struggle, will be essential. What is it that leads to mediocrity, for settling for anything but the best? Many things — such as giving in to deliberate venial sin, and not repenting of it, and failing to avoid the occasions of sin. But there is one thing we may not be very conscious of, which is truly fundamental. It is the danger of gradually losing faith in God’s power to get us to our

goal — which is, after all, *God's* goal for us. “*This is the will of God,*” St Paul writes, “*your sanctification.*” The struggle against sin can seem so unrelenting — and it is indeed unrelenting — that we can gradually think that sanctity is an impossible project — impossible for God too. So we lose faith in God's power to get us there, which is really losing faith in God.

So let us always begin again. Now I begin! Each time, let us renew our faith in God's power.



Wednesday of the twelfth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 28 (27):8-9 The Lord is the strength of his people, a saving refuge for the one he has anointed. Save your people, Lord, and bless your heritage, and govern them for ever.

Collect Grant, O Lord, that we may always revere and love your holy name, for you never deprive of your guidance those you set firm on the foundation of your love. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Genesis 15:1-12.17-18; Psalm 104;

Matthew 7:15-20

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognise them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad

fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognise them. (Matthew 7:15-20)

False prophets It is well known that a major problem for the early Church was the rise of Gnosticism with its various and profoundly unorthodox beliefs about Jesus Christ. Gnosticism was a wider phenomenon than a set of beliefs that falsified Christian doctrine, but it did constitute a major problem for the earlier and later Church. It often posited Christ as a demiurge, teaching that Jesus was a spirit that seemed to be human — and many other notions at complete odds with Christian belief. The Albigensian heresy of the Middle Ages was the most notable example of later Gnosticism. I remember attending a seminar in the school of Studies in Religion at one university, and I was struck by the deep sympathy of some academics for the plight, as they regarded it, of the early Christian gnostics. Gnostics were persecuted for their beliefs, as they saw it, and the demise of Gnosticism

(actually, it never died out) was a triumph of intolerance. I was intrigued by the sympathetic academic interest that Gnosticism attracted, and how the early Gnostics seemed to have won the hearts of those academics. I had the impression that the question of truth was not considered to be important — what mattered was freedom of personal preference. The perceived tragedy of Gnostic history was that their beliefs — which some academics seemed to think were cute — were so roundly opposed at their time and driven from the scene. Now, of course, it is a great gain in the modern era, the era of the last few centuries in the West, that personal freedom and the right of the individual conscience has been discovered and made a high philosophical and cultural priority. What now tends to be forgotten, though — just as personal freedom was often forgotten in a previous era — is the paramount importance of the *objective truth*. The serious concern with Gnosticism was that the truth of Jesus Christ, as proclaimed by the Church, was deformed and presented as the real message. In our day many lack a concern for the

critical importance of the objective Truth, and in particular, Revealed Truth. Many do not see Truth as saving, as the bearer of life, and Revealed Truth as redemptive and sanctifying. It is just “an opinion” — “your viewpoint,” “your position,” having no more value than “my opinion.”

Of course, our Lord would never force-feed the Truth into people. When he was going up to Jerusalem for his final week of Passion and Death, he arrived at a Samaritan village, intending to stay there with his disciples. But the Samaritans, because Christ’s party was on their way to Jerusalem for the feast, would not receive them. James and John wanted our Lord to agree to their calling down fire from heaven on the Samaritans for their inhospitable affront. But our Lord rebuked his two special disciples, and turned aside for a different village. On another occasion, our Lord and his party, having arrived at the semi-pagan area of the Decapolis, was confronted by a notoriously dangerous demoniac, inhabited by several demons — “Legion” was their name. Our Lord, at a word, drove them all from the hapless man. Out came the nearby

villagers and made their wishes clear — our Lord was to go. They could not cope with his presence. So he left — he accepted their wishes. He force-fed no one. This is an example to the Church and her members for the ages in their prosecution of the mission he has given them. They are to *go to the whole world and make disciples of all the nations* — but they are to make them in the way he did. That way is by the vigorous and faithful witness to the Truth of Jesus Christ, a witness that respects personal freedom in the way Christ respected freedom. All that having been said, there is nothing in Jesus Christ that looked upon the denial or distortion of Revealed Truth as but an “opinion,” one among other “opinions.” Christ would never have allowed such a notion to take root in the mind of his disciples. We are to die for the Truth of Jesus Christ, just as he died for it. When standing before Pilate, the representative of the Empire, Christ described his mission as bearing witness to the Truth. *For this was I born*, he told the puzzled Roman official, *to bear witness to the Truth*, and those who are of the Truth listen to my

voice. Pilate was well out of his depth, and could only respond, “*What is Truth?*” His question to Christ, uttered perhaps in scepticism and scorn, is the question of the ages. The answer of the modern age is that truth is no more than a personal persuasion or preference. The true answer is the statement of Jesus Christ: “*I am the Way, the Truth and the Life.*”

In our Gospel today (Matthew 7: 15-20) our Lord warns against those who will come distorting the truth — in other words, false prophets. There had been a long history of false prophets in the chosen people of God, and the Old Testament indicts them repeatedly and severely. Christ is in the line of the holy Scriptures in warning against false prophets. The one thing necessary for any human being, let alone a disciple of Jesus Christ, is to hear the word of God and to put it into practice. How terrible a thing it is, then, to falsify the word of God! The word of Jesus Christ has been entrusted by him to the Church, and the Church brings it to the ages, including to each of us,

children of our age as we are. Let us treasure that word, and be its true prophets to others.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 7:15-20)

“Beware of false prophets” Repeatedly in the New Testament the disciples of Jesus are warned of false teachers and false prophets. St Paul insists time and again on the danger of being led astray by false teaching and St John in his letters insists on it too. It has been one of the great and constant issues down through the ages of Church history. The striking thing about Christianity is its proliferation of divisions into sects and schismatic bodies, led by this or that leader who has his message at variance with that of the Universal Catholic Church. We see it in the infant churches of the New Testament, we see it in the early centuries of the Church especially in the fourth and fifth centuries, and we see it time and again in the Middle

Ages and in the Reformation period at the dawn of the modern age.

Let us take to heart this warning of our Lord and resolve to be distinguished by our love for the teaching Church especially as embodied in the successor of Peter, the vicar of Jesus Christ. We ought seek to know his teaching and integrate it into our lives. Let us reject all false teachers, and drink instead from the fountain head, from the purest waters.



Thursday of the twelfth week in Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: 2 Kings 24:8-17; Psalm 78;

Matthew 7:21-29

Jesus said, Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform

many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’ Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash. When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law. (Matthew 7: 21-29)

The Rock I once viewed an interview on the television network EWTN conducted by Marcus Grodi. Marcus was conversing with a one-time Presbyterian minister who had converted to the Catholic Church. The convert Catholic was pointing out that, when he was a

Protestant, his knowledge of Church history, of Christian doctrine and the Scriptures were all set within the time frame beginning with the Reformation. Luther's protest of 1517, when he nailed up his ninety-five theses, followed by Pope Leo X's Encyclical of 1520, *Exsurge Domine*, began the Protestant Reformation. As is understandable, the Presbyterian convert being interviewed was educated exclusively in the Protestant tradition which grew from 1517. One of the points he made was that, as a result, very many things in Scripture itself he never noticed, such as the teaching of the Scriptures on the Eucharist in John chapter 6. He gradually learnt that there was a Tradition far greater than the tradition within which he was raised and educated, and this Tradition, which was also that of the early Church, should shape the mind by which the Scriptures are to be read and understood. I say this by way of introduction to our Gospel text today (Matthew 7: 21-29), in which our Lord gives his parable of the house that is built on rock. This teaching, emphasising the absolutely fundamental character of obedience to the word of Christ, appears as the

solemn conclusion of the great Sermon on the Mount. The “rock” is Christ himself and his word. Building on that “rock” means obedience to his word. On no other rock should man build. There was another occasion in the Scriptures when a “rock” was at the centre of the event. Moses was commanded by God (Numbers 20:8) to take his rod, and to *tell* the rock (*tēn petran*) before the people to yield its water, and it would give forth its waters. Moses *struck* the rock — and then struck it *again*, obviously doubting (Numbers 20: 9-12). He failed to believe absolutely in the word and promise of God, and to act on it. The same “rock” out of which (*ek petras*) the waters flowed is recalled in Deuteronomy 8:15. In this case, the “rock” symbolized the word of God and its power — which is to say, God himself from whom comes life. Reference to a “rock” contained rich Scriptural allusions.

One manuscript version of Deuteronomy 32:4 reads: “The Rock — how faultless are his deeds.” Other manuscripts (such as the Septuagint) have “God” instead of “Rock.” God, then, is the Rock. In Psalm 61:2, it is

suggested that God is the rock of one's life: "*You will set me on high upon a rock: you will give me rest, for you are my refuge*". In David's song to the Lord when he had rescued him from Saul (2 Samuel 22:2), God is his rock: "O Lord my rock" (*kurie petra mou* — Septuagint). In Daniel 2:45 the "stone" which broke to pieces the tile, iron, bronze, silver and gold was the kingdom set up by God, a kingdom never to be destroyed. It will put an end to those other kingdoms. God is a rock, a stone stronger than other things. I am sure that our Lord's description of the house built on a rock would have had the allusions that the image of a rock carries in the Old Testament. Our Lord was also, though, speaking of himself as the Rock, for it is those who hear his word and keep it who are like the one who builds his house on rock. As God was the Rock of Israel and of every Israelite, so Jesus Christ is the Rock on which every person ought build his house. If the house is built on him and on obedience to his word, all will be well. If it is not, it will fall. Particularly significant is the scene when Christ asks his disciples who men say he is. It is Simon who

answers: *You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God* (Matthew 16:16). It is on this that everything is built — Christ, then, is the Rock. At that, Christ appoints Simon to be the Rock of his Church. Christ, the new Rock, is now appointing Simon to be the (visible) Rock on which he will build his Church, his House. When Christ cleansed the Temple, he said that his Father's House was to be a House of prayer. Christ was now building a new House, and the Rock of the House would be Simon — *"You are Peter (Petros), and on this Rock (petra) I will build my Church. The gates of hell will not prevail over it."* So the rains and floods would come, but the new House would not fall. It was founded on Rock — the Rock of Christ, represented by Simon, now Christ's appointed Rock.

There are many things to be noticed when reading the inspired word of God, but we must read it with the mind of Christ and his Church, for it is out of his Church, and its divinely planted root, the chosen people of Israel, that the inspired Scriptures were formed and written. They must be read within the Tradition of the Church, and no other.

Divine Revelation is transmitted by that interwoven channel, the channel of Scripture and Tradition which the Church in her authoritative and divinely-assisted teaching helps us to understand. In this sense, let us ever drink from the Scriptures, for as St Jerome writes, to be ignorant of the Scriptures is to be ignorant of Christ.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 7:21-29)

“Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name?”
One of the things that can affect a person’s joy and contentment in life is the question of success. One can look back on the past and consider the present, and observe that there is not much to be proud of. One is a “nobody,” with no notable achievements. Indeed, this can be a correct assessment of the facts. Most of us are “nobodies,” with few notable achievements. Our lives are “ordinary.” This consideration can make a person sad and disappointed. But what does our Lord say? Notable achievements of themselves are not noteworthy in the sight of God. He

says, speaking of the judgment, that “*when that day comes many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, cast out demons in your name, work many miracles in your name?’ Then I shall tell them to their faces: I have never known you, away from me you evil men.*” That was because, for all their notable deeds, they were not actually doing the will of God. The “sensible” man is the one who hears Christ’s words and acts on them. Our happiness and our satisfaction ought lie in doing God’s will, whatever that might mean in the providence of God, notable deeds or not. So if being noticed by others comes our way in the fulfilment of God’s will, so be it. If it means being relatively unknown and unnoticed, or in other words, if our lives are “ordinary”, so be it.

Let us remember that obscurity was the path of Mary and Joseph in Nazareth and, at Nazareth, of our Lord himself. The doing of God’s will — let that be our joy and our fulfilment.



Friday of the twelfth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 28 (27):8-9 The Lord is the strength of his people, a saving refuge for the one he has anointed. Save your people, Lord, and bless your heritage, and govern them for ever.

Collect Grant, O Lord, that we may always revere and love your holy name, for you never deprive of your guidance those you set firm on the foundation of your love. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Kings 25:1-12; Psalm 136;

Matthew 8:1-4

When he came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean. Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. I am willing, he said. Be clean! Immediately he was

cured of his leprosy. Then Jesus said to him, See that you don't tell anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.
(Matthew 8:1-4)

Splendour St John states in his Prologue that *“the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father”* (John 1:14). The glory that was beheld in Jesus Christ was not a spectacle of mere physical, aesthetic, intellectual or some such glory. It was pre-eminently a moral glory, a moral splendour that was *“full of grace and truth.”* Jesus Christ was divine holiness incarnate, and the religion he revealed was especially a religion of eminent morality and holiness for those who embraced it. Now, this distinctively high moral life in religion ought not be taken for granted, as if it was to be naturally expected of any religion. It certainly could not be taken for granted even of the very gods of man's religions. For example, St Bede, the Anglo-Saxon scholar and monk of the eighth century, described his own ancestors as a

warlike, barbarous and pagan people. He does not name the gods of their religions — except summarily to denote those pre-Christian religions as the worship of “demons.” The Roman historian Tacitus, writing half a millennium before Bede, tells us that the Germans worshipped an Earth Goddess and two gods of war. The Viking scholar Magnus Magnusson stated that the Angles and Saxons worshipped Woden, venerated as the ancestor of the Hengist and Horsa, the legendary founders of the English nation, and that most of the early Saxon kings claimed descent from Woden. These gods were primitive and bloodthirsty – Tacitus tells us that human sacrifices were offered to Woden. Adam of Bremen, writing in the tenth century, describes the worship of Odin at Uppsala, in Sweden. He reports that of every living thing that is male, nine heads are offered, with the blood that is customary *to placate gods of this sort*. They hang the bodies in the sacred grove that adjoins the temple. ... On each day they offer a man along with other living beings in such a number that in the course of the nine days they will have made offerings of

seventy two creatures. It reveals how their gods were to be placated. Magnusson tells us that the Viking god Thor, the God of Thunder, was known by the Anglo-Saxons as Thunor. He was the god of the sky, ruler of storms and tempests, and was the god of the ordinary people. Tiw and the goddess Frig were also among the deities they worshipped.

It seems clear that the gods of the pagan Saxons were primitive and barbaric, demanding human sacrifice in order to avert the disasters they might otherwise bring upon their people, through defeat in battle, storm or tempest, or failure of the harvest. There is literary evidence of this in two manuscripts, now in the British Museum, which give details of the correct ritual and spell for various occasions. Now, while these pagan beliefs were superstitious and primitive, it does not mean that they simply reflected the rational capacity of the best of their societies, nor their best moral aspirations. In one of the most poetic passages in his *De Ecclesia Anglorum et Gentes*, St Bede reports one of king Edwin's advisers saying to him the following: "When

we compare the present life of man on earth to that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me like the swift flight of a single sparrow through the banqueting hall where you are sitting at dinner on a winter's day with your thanes and counsellors. In the midst there is a comforting fire to warm the hall; outside, the storms of winter rain or snow are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms; but after a few moments of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the wintry world from which he came. Even so, man appears on earth for a little while; but of what went before this life or of what follows, we know nothing. Therefore, if this new teaching has brought any more certain knowledge, it seems only right that we should follow it." On another occasion, Bede tells us that the chief priest advised the following: *"Your Majesty, let us give careful consideration to this new teaching, for I frankly admit that... the religion we have hitherto professed seems valueless and powerless"*. That is to say, what the Christian teaching manifestly offered was

the splendour of an exalted morality as well as an objective, transcendent truth. This was proclaimed as being present in the Person of Jesus Christ, in whom is the fullness of the godhead bodily. The gods of natural religion were not a very moral lot, and not much could be said for the truth of their promises. The Christian Faith as proclaimed by Christ's Catholic Church is Good News for the spirit of man who longs for the splendour of God, all too often without realizing it.

All this brings us to our Gospel passage (Matthew 8: 1-4). Our Lord has come down from the Mountain where, as the new Moses, he proclaimed his new Law. The crowds were astonished at his teaching (as were, for instance, the pagan Anglo-Saxons), for he taught them as one having authority (Matthew 7:28-29). A leper came to him – and in his helplessness he represents fallen man across the ages. *“If you will, you can make me clean”*, he said. The leper longs for One in whom there resides the splendour of goodness and truth, for such a One is his salvation. He was not to be disappointed: *“I will; be*

clean!” Christ is the splendour of God, full of grace and truth. In him we find our life, for he is the Way, the Truth and the Life, the only name by which men are saved.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 8:1-4)

“If you want to you can cure me...Of course I want to! Be cured!” We have in our Gospel passage today (Matthew 8:1-4) an example of a prayer that was heard, and heard instantaneously. It is a wonderful thing to have a prayer answered by God, but how wonderful it is to have it answered immediately, and in the form in which it was desired! Are there any lessons to be learnt in this? To begin with, the leper approached our Lord earnestly desiring that he grant what he was asking. It was not a trivial, half-hearted request. His soul was fully behind it, and he was presenting his whole being to God in his request. He was requesting a form of salvation, salvation from the scourge

and death of leprosy. Moreover, he approached our Lord full of respect and humility. We read that he came up and bowed low in front of him. In our daily prayer, is our soul manifesting a similar attitude, or do we take our acquaintance with our Lord very much for granted? Are we humble and respectful to our Lord in presenting our petitions? Finally the leper really did believe our Lord could grant his request, if he chose to. Do we really believe God has the power to answer our prayers? It is clear from the Gospels that our Lord looked for faith in granting the requests of people.

Let us take to heart the example of the leper who had his request so wonderfully granted.



Saturday of the twelfth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 28 (27):8-9 The Lord is the strength of his people, a saving refuge for the one he has anointed. Save your people, Lord, and bless your heritage, and govern them for ever.

Collect Grant, O Lord, that we may always revere and love your holy name, for you never deprive of your guidance those you set firm on the foundation of your love. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Genesis 18:1-15; Psalm: Luke 1;

Matthew 8:5-17

When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. Lord, he said, my servant lies at home paralysed and in terrible suffering. Jesus said to him, I will go and heal him. The centurion replied, Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof.

But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it. When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then Jesus said to the centurion, Go! It will be done just as you believed it would. And his servant was healed at that very hour. When Jesus came into Peter's house, he saw Peter's mother in law lying in bed with a fever. He touched her hand and the fever left her, and she got up and began to wait on him. When evening came, many who were demon possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfil what was

spoken through the prophet Isaiah: He took up our infirmities and carried our diseases. (Matthew 8: 5-17)

The Church Catholic One of the great gains of modern times, including and perhaps especially in the West, is the appreciation of *culture* — one's own culture, and the culture of other peoples. For instance, over the past half-century, there has been in Australia a new realization and appreciation of the distinctively Australian character. It is a now word of criticism in Australia to say of something or some practice that "it is not Australian." In Australia, there has been a proliferation of interest in Australian literature over the last fifty or sixty years. I clearly remember when, in the late 1950s, it became an option to study Australian literature at School Leaving Certificate level. It is understood in the modern world that culture is at the heart of the soul of a nation, and that it is at the heart of the life of a nation's citizens. In fact, one could say that a nation's culture is its soul. The next thing to be observed is that, looking at the matter from the perspective of the ages — which is to say, looking at

human culture in terms of millennia and mankind in general — at the heart of culture lies *religion*. Of course, the anomaly in this pattern is the secular culture of modern Western societies. Very many anthropologists have assumed religion to be a function of a society's culture, but at least this reflects their conviction that generally religion is found to be deeply embedded in culture. There is, incidentally, another view on the relation between religion and culture — that, typically, religion lies so much at the root of a society's life that it is not a mere function of its culture, but the principal creator and shaper of culture. In this sense, just as a culture is the soul of a society, so its religion is the soul of a culture. The point I am making, though, is that ordinarily (that is, over the ages) religion is so much part of the culture and soul of a society that generally it identifies with and is rooted to that culture. If the culture spreads, so does its religion. Its religion is the religion precisely of that particular culture. If the religion spreads, it is generally because the culture has spread or been embraced. Islam, for instance, is intimately bound up

with the culture that bears it along, and is rarely if ever detached from it. My own impression is that if it is embraced, its embrace generally involves, to a significant point, the embrace of the culture. Whatever of that opinion, my point is that in history generally each culture has had its religion, and the religion is intimately, perhaps inseparably, bound to that culture.

In this, the Christian religion both as an historical phenomenon and as envisaged by its divine Founder, appears on the scene as something new. Of course, wherever it is found, it is embedded in a culture — if not the culture of the country where its adherents live, then at least in the (sub)culture of its adherents. Further, it has often been perceived as a feature of a particular culture. For instance, it has been viewed many times in history by particular societies as a Western phenomenon. Still, this perception is, in essence, mistaken. It is not bound to any particular culture. It takes root in a particular culture and embraces it, redeeming it, giving it a new and elevating life, and making it far more than it would have been. Pope

John Paul II used often refer to the fact that due to the Church's missionary endeavour, Christ has become Chinese, Asian, African, Eskimo, or whatever — just as he became Jewish when born in Bethlehem two thousand or more years ago. Our Lord was thoroughly Semitic, thoroughly Jewish. He was not a Roman, nor a Greek, nor Egyptian, nor Syrian, nor Gallic, nor Germanic. He was Jewish. The Word of God became flesh, and the flesh was Jewish. But what was distinctive about this was that Jesus Christ, glorified and at the head of his body the Church, was destined to be mystically united to believers of all the nations — Romans, Greeks, Egyptians, Syrians, Gauls, Britons, Germans. In this union, they would not all become Jewish. Rather, in them the glorified Christ would become Roman, Greek, Egyptian, Syrian, Gallic, and German. His body the Church was never destined to be a Jewish phenomenon simply because Christ was Jewish, and because the context of his teaching was Jewish. The Church was to be the Church of all the nations, with each nation showing forth the Face of Jesus Christ. Each nation,

though, would show this divine Face with its distinctive cultural and national traits, and speaking its own language. There is a beautiful painting of Madonna and Child, cast in the features of the Australian traditional Aborigine. This reveals a great truth. Christ loved each one of us so much that he gave himself over to death for us, and he gives himself to each one of us in grace. In this, his self-donation to us, we are set on the path to our distinctive, individual perfection, with all the cultural characteristics that are ours.

In our Gospel today, our Lord, marvelling at the faith of the non-Jewish centurion, tells his Jewish audience that *“many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”* (Matthew 8: 5-17). Christ was looking ahead to the day when his body the Church would be made up of *“the east and the west.”* The Church is essentially, and not just accidentally, catholic —

and it is one because it is united with the one and same Jesus Christ. In him, the Church is one, it is holy, it is catholic or universal, embracing all cultures, and it is apostolic. Let us rejoice in our membership of Christ's Church, founded on the Apostles with Peter at its head.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 8:5-17)

“Nowhere in Israel have I found faith like this”

We have in our Gospel scene an instance of a prayer of petition that was answered, and the decisive element was the presence of faith. Inasmuch as our needs are many and great, it is surely important that we learn how we ought to ask Christ our Lord for what we need. The Gospel introduces us to a centurion. The centurion would have been a “Greek”, which is to say not of the chosen people of Israel — for our Lord at the end contrasts his faith with that of “Israel”. The centurion “*pleaded*” with our Lord and

acknowledged that he was “*not worthy*” to have our Lord visiting his dwelling. He was, then, truly humble and reverent before One he recognised as great and holy. This humility disposed him for faith. And faith he certainly had, faith in our Lord’s power to save from death, a power he believed our Lord could exercise at a word, and from a distance. This was a man who was outside the people of God’s Revelation. On our Lord’s own word, we know his faith was outstanding (“*nowhere in Israel have I found faith like this*”) and he was immediately granted his request.

Let us learn from this and ask our Lord to help us be humble and believing, and always so. Thus will our prayers be answered.



Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 47 (46):2 All peoples, clap your hands. Cry to God with shouts of joy!

Collect O God, who through the grace of adoption chose us to be children of light, grant, we pray, that we may not be wrapped in the darkness of error but always be seen to stand in the bright light of truth. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Kings 4:8-11.14-16; Psalm 88;

Romans 6:3 4.9-11; Matthew 10:37-42

Jesus said to his apostles: “Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives

the one who sent me. Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward.” (Matthew 10: 37-42)

The lay person in the Church Years ago it was commonly thought — with many wonderful exceptions — that the work of spreading the Catholic and Christian Faith and living a truly spiritual life was the province of the religious professionals, which is to say, the ordained priests and consecrated religious. There were notable movements within the Church, and many individuals, challenging this popular, unspoken assumption. Nevertheless, it was a common view among laity and even among some clergy. I remember years ago speaking to a relative of mine who thought that priests ought work as lawyers and in other secular professions, because then they would be able to attract to God and to the Church those in the world with

whom they were working. How could the priest hope to attract to God and the Church the generality of persons when he was not working in the world where they are, on a day-to-day basis? Behind this suggestion was the assumption that it was the priest who engaged in an apostolic mission, and not others in the Church. I told him that his proposal was ridiculous. The priest would have no time to practise as a lawyer if he was to do his work as a priest properly. But more importantly, in the Church's teaching it is the Catholic and Christian lawyers and other lay professionals themselves who should be doing on a day-to-day basis the very thing he proposed the ordained priest do as a civil lawyer. That is to say, the Catholic lay person should, within the context of his professional work, be carrying on a discreet yet very real apostolate of attracting fellow professionals to God, and in God to the Church where Christ abides as its head. What he was suggesting for the priest is *exactly* the work of the *lay* member of the Church. The layperson's situation in life is a secular situation. He lives in the world, not as one who

shares in the spirit of the world, but as one who serves the world from within with the spirit of Christ. In this service he brings Christ to the world. He fills his lay work and the world around him with the presence of Christ, and by means of his work he connects the world to God. St Paul tells us in his Letters that the baptised person is *in Christ*. This is the dignity of every baptised lay person. In him, Christ and his Church are present where he lives and works in the world.

Of course, a major challenge for every lay person is simply to *remember* this from day to day, and consciously and purposefully to live *in Christ* and according to his teachings. The likelihood is that day by day, immersed in the things of the world that naturally attract us, we will live by sight alone and not by faith. We will live only in view of what we see and hear and feel. We can so easily forget that there are far greater realities that are not seen at all, which are beyond what our senses can grasp. These realities are those that God has revealed and are known by faith. They are the realities that pertain to God and his plan

for us. We can appreciate and realize them, not because of what we see, but on the basis of faith in God's word which is given to us by Christ. It comes to us through the witness and teaching of the Church. The central reality of all that is revealed is unseen. Yet we are called to live in view of it. This unseen reality is the person of Christ our God who is ever with us. The lay person is called to live in the world of family, work, community, society and culture, with Christ at the centre of everything. The Christ whom he serves cannot be physically seen, yet he is far more real and constant than anything that is seen. The lay person is called to live in the world with Christ before him as if he saw him — which is to say, with a constant and lively faith, nourished by the means provided by the Church for a strong spiritual life. At home in the family, at study at school, at University and higher education, looking after the children, at work in the office or at one's trade — wherever one may be, Christ is present there. Christ who is in us serves others through and in our service of them. By our service we bring him to the world. Conversely,

Christ awaits us in others in their need. We serve Christ in others, for Christ said that whatever we do to the least, we do to him. So wherever the Catholic lay person is in the world, be he young, middle aged, or old, Christ who is in him is both serving and being served. The work of the lay person is to bring Christ to the world and to serve him in the world. In this way, through the lay member of the Church, the world is brought near to Christ and is opened to the grace and action of Christ. The mission of the lay person is to evangelize and transform the world from within.

The lay person does this by cultivating a spirit of prayer in the midst of daily work, and by sanctifying the day and its work. We ought do our work in life in such a way that it will be holy in the sight of God. We ought do our work also in such a way that we are sanctified in the doing of it. We ought do our work in such a way that others will be sanctified because of it. One's work is a most sacred means of sanctification and evangelization. Everything the lay person touches, as it were, ought be

sanctified the more as a result of his touch, because of his continual union with our Lord. Imagine if the entire laity of the Church were doing this, or at least most of the laity! A great sleeping giant would be roused and the world would be raised to God. Let each of us say, *this means me!* I shall serve our Lord where I am in my ordinary everyday life. So then, now I begin!

Further Reading: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: no. 897-913 (The Laity)



Monday of the thirteenth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 47 (46):2 All peoples, clap your hands. Cry to God with shouts of joy!

Collect O God, who through the grace of adoption chose us to be children of light, grant, we pray, that we may not be wrapped in the darkness of error but always be seen to stand in the bright light of truth. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Amos 2:6-10,13-16; Psalm 49;

Matthew 8:18-22

When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake. Then a scribe came to him and said, Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go. Jesus replied, Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. Another of the disciples said to him, Lord, first let

me go and bury my father. But Jesus told him, Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead. (Matthew 8:18-22)

A certain scribe In our Gospel passage from St Matthew today, a certain “*scribe*” is mentioned, as is “*another of the disciples.*” Perhaps St Matthew’s designation of the latter as “*another*” of his disciples implies that the “*scribe*” was a disciple in some sense too. The scribe professes his intention to follow our Lord wherever he goes, and our Lord warns him that this will mean deprivation. At first sight, the “*scribes*” do not seem to get “a good press,” as we might say, in the Gospels. The “scribe” in its root or original meaning was one who could and would write — he knew how to write, and we see this meaning more commonly in the Old Testament. He could write out official documents, letters, decrees and financial records. Because of this they were usually regarded as learned. We read in 1 Chronicles 27:32 that “*Jonathan, David’s uncle and a man of intelligence, was a counsellor and scribe,*” and that he and Jehile were “*tutors of the king’s sons.*” In the Gospels the “*scribes*” are a special

group among the Jewish religious leaders. With them, the emphasis was on their learning in the Law. Their primary duties were to study the Law of Moses, teach it to the people, and even to help settle disputes involving the questions of the Law. There had been and were outstanding scribes, an obvious one being Ezra of the Old Testament Book of Ezra. We read that Ezra “*was a scribe, well-versed in the law of Moses which was given by the Lord the God of Israel.*” Further, “*the hand of the Lord, his God was upon him*” (Ezra 7: 6). “*Ezra had set his heart on the study and practice of the Law of the Lord and on teaching the statutes and ordinances in Israel*” (Ezra 7:10). Ezra was a magnificent example of the true “*scribe*,” and was one among the saints of the Old Testament. So we must never imagine that being “*a scribe*” was an unworthy path. Though our Lord condemned many of them, he states that “*scribes*” had been and would be sent by God with a mission from him (Matthew 23:34). Too many, though, had spiritually lost their way and with it their

authentic authority. The people saw that Christ spoke with authority, and not like the scribes (Matthew 7:29).

There is no doubt that by far the majority of references to the scribes (and the Pharisees) in the Gospels are condemnatory. They joined forces with others of the religious leadership and attacked Christ with persistence and animus, finally orchestrating his end with their collaborators. However, this must not lead us to think that *all* scribes were of this ilk, and our Gospel passage today (Matthew 8: 18 22) presents us with a good scribe. Our scribe is enthusiastically — if perhaps without counting the cost — offering to follow Jesus wherever he might go. On another occasion, *“one of the scribes came, and having heard them debating — knowing that Jesus had answered well — asked him, What is the first of all the commandments?”* This particular scribe was not in sympathy with those who were trying to trick Christ by their questions. When Jesus answered him, he responded, *“Well said, Teacher,”* and offered his own comment — at which our Lord told him that he was *“not far from the*

kingdom of God.” Interestingly, we read that thereafter “*no-one dared question him more*” (Mark 12: 28-34). Perhaps the attitude of that particular scribe set an example for others, apart from the unfailing power of Christ’s responses. We read in John 12:42 that “*even of the rulers (archontoon) many believed in him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him*”. Perhaps among those “*rulers*” there were included some “*scribes*” — and certainly at least one of the “*Pharisees*,” Nicodemus, believed in him. We read that after Pentecost, Gamaliel, “*a teacher of the law*” — so, in some sense a prominent scribe — urged that the disciples be let well alone (Acts 5:34-40). What I am saying is that our “*scribe*” of today’s Gospel represents the better sort in a religious profession that had declined in character. He too, though, had his limitations — as we can divine from our Lord’s warning on his enthusiasm. Notwithstanding this, he may surely be taken to represent the better sort in any and every profession. For after all, what profession or class of persons *en masse* in our Lord’s time responded to him as they should have?

There were some good, some mediocre, and some bad. Wherever we stand in our society, whoever we are, the call of Jesus Christ is directed to us.

Matthew, the author of our Gospel passage, was a despised tax-collector. He received the invitation to follow Jesus Christ, and he responded immediately. Further, he persevered. Our “*scribe*” today is being told by our Lord that he must expect difficulties, and discipleship will mean perseverance. We have received the invitation — how shall we respond? That is the question for every day. Do we respond with enthusiasm? Difficulties must be expected. Let us take our stand with Jesus Christ, knowing that this means taking up our daily cross and following in the footsteps of the Master. It is in this way that life, abundant life, will be ours.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 8:18-22)

“Follow me, and leave the dead to bury the dead.”

Our Lord came on earth to make disciples. Throughout the pages of the Gospels he is making disciples. The mission he gave to his apostles before he ascended into heaven was to make *disciples* of all the nations. That is the mission of the Church, and we as members of the Church all share in that mission. We were made, created, to be the loving disciples of Jesus the Master. It is the purpose of our life. So then, the worth of anything in our life can be assessed by applying that yardstick to it — what is its place in relation to the one thing necessary, my being a disciple of Jesus Christ? Conversely, true and ultimate progress in life is also to be measured by that yardstick — my being a genuine disciple of our Lord. The Gospel scene of today (Matthew 8: 18:22) reminds us of the fundamental issue of discipleship. Two people responded to our Lord's requirement of discipleship in ways that perhaps were less than satisfactory: the first seems to have been a little

shallow in his enthusiasm and resolve, and the second hesitant and prone to second thoughts.

Let us be reminded of our own weakness, and pray earnestly for the grace to be a disciple of Jesus totally and in truth. We have but one life. Let us live as disciples of Jesus to the full.



Tuesday of the thirteenth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 47 (46):2 All peoples, clap your hands. Cry to God with shouts of joy!

Collect O God, who through the grace of adoption chose us to be children of light, grant, we pray, that we may not be wrapped in the darkness of error but always be seen to stand in the bright light of truth. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Amos 3:1-8; 4:11-12; Psalm 5;
Matthew 8:23-27

Then Jesus got into the boat and his disciples followed him. Without warning, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. The disciples went and woke him, saying, Lord, save us! We're going to drown! He replied, You of little faith, why are you so afraid? Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. The

men were amazed and asked, What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him! (Matthew 8:23-27)

God will save The Gospel of St Matthew is replete with references to the Old Testament, showing how Jesus fulfils all that the Old Testament promised, expected and aspired to. Our Lord in his teaching repeatedly refers to Old Testament figures and teachings. In the chapter from which our passage today is taken, our Lord tells his hearers that *“many shall come from the east and west, and take their places with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven”* (8:11). Christ cast out devils and healed the sick *“that it be fulfilled what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet, he took our weaknesses and bore our diseases”* (8:17). Christ does many things, not only with the *result* that the Scriptures were fulfilled, but *in order that* the Scriptures might be fulfilled. That is to say, he saw in the Scriptures indicators of the will of his heavenly Father for him, and he chose his course accordingly. We also see in the Old Testament instances

of a prophet engaged in symbolic actions which made clear the message he was announcing on God's behalf. For instance, Hosea is commanded to marry a "*harlot wife*" (Hosea 1:2). She represents Israel's infidelity to her Lord. Christ's actions — including the one in our Gospel today — represents his divine message. The point is that Jesus Christ is deeply part of the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament, and his deeds had an important role in his work of revelation. Our Gospel passage today immediately reminds a person steeped in the Scriptures of another event involving a prophet at sea — that of Jonah. The disciples in the boat may have made the connection during the event (we do not know), but surely Matthew means his reader to think of it. On another occasion our Lord linked himself with Jonah and declared himself to be a new and greater Jonah. In the same Gospel of St Matthew our Lord responds to the demand from "*certain of the scribes and Pharisees*" that he give "*a sign.*" He answered that the "*only sign that would be given was the sign of the prophet Jonah*" who was in the whale for "*three days and three*

nights.” The pagans of Nineveh repented at Jonah’s preaching, and “*a greater than Jonah is here*” (Matthew 12:39-41).

Let us consider the backdrop of Jonah here. The prophet Jonah was not especially obedient to his prophetic mission — and in this there is an immediate contrast with Jesus of Nazareth. He made ready to “*flee to Tarshish away from the Lord*” and boarded the ship to Tarshish “*away from the Lord*” (Jonah 1:3). But the Lord God “*hurled a violent wind upon the sea, and in the furious tempest that arose the ship was on the point of breaking up. Then the mariners became frightened and each one cried to his god*” (1:4-5). In the midst of the storm, Jonah is found to be *asleep* in the inner part of the ship. The captain came to him saying “*What are you doing asleep?*” Get up and call upon your god — he might help us so that we do not perish (Jonah 1: 5-6). In our Gospel scene today, our Lord embarks “*in the ship*” and “*his disciples followed him*” (Matthew 8:23). Then in the midst of the storm our Lord (like Jonah) is found *asleep*. His disciples come to

him and awaken him, asking him — save us, or we perish! (Matthew 8:24-25). While the sailors in Jonah's case ask him to call upon *his god*, the sailors in the Gospel event ask *Christ* to save them. The result of Jonah being cast into the sea was that "*the raging of the sea abated*" (1:15). The result of Christ's word was that "*there was a great calm*" (Matt 8:26). In both cases the sailors marvelled — Jonah's sailors being struck with a great fear of the Lord, and in the Gospel, the disciples "*marvelled.*" But the effect of the connection of the Gospel event with the incident of Jonah is to bring out the stark contrast between the two. Christ is ever so much greater than Jonah. Not only is he the truest and holiest of prophets, but he transcends all prophets by his power alone. In the Old Testament, only God has power over the seas — the powerful seas! The book of Jonah shows how helpless man is before the seas which are a symbol of the might of creation. God brings the calm. In the Gospel scene there is no need for some action of appeasement to bring calm, such as was the casting overboard of Jonah. All that was needed was the word of

Jesus Christ — his rebuke of the winds and the sea. We notice that the “*rebuke*” (*epetimēsen*) is the same word used of his “*rebuke*” (*epetimēsen*) of the demon on a later occasion (Matthew 17:18).

Our Gospel scene today finds Christ in the tradition of the prophets, but far transcending them all. *There is a greater than Jonah here.* Indeed, Christ is found exercising divine power at will. It is a further step in the gradual revelation of his divinity. “*What manner of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him!*” (Matthew 8: 23-27). He is a man, thoroughly man, more so than any other man precisely because unsullied by original or personal sin. But he is at the same time far more than a man. He is God, literally and truly God — God the Son become man — with all the power of God to save. This action at sea is a prophetic action, showing forth his power to save. He can save us from anything, including the worst of afflictions — sin, and all that flows from sin.

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Second reflection:

Sin The Genesis account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah by God for their sins (Genesis 19:15-29) reveals what our conscience suggests, that sin is very real. It brings down retribution sooner or later. The biblical picture of the punishment of these cities is very apposite for an age when the reality of sin is denied or ignored. Sin is assumed to be a subjective persuasion, because God himself is assumed to be a purely subjective matter. But on the contrary, God and sin are real. God is holy and he does not accept sin. But let our imaginations flow on from the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to centuries later. Our gaze rests not on the two sinful cities pounded to dust for their sins. It rests on the crucified Jesus, the all holy one. Fire and brimstone had poured down on him, as it were, in the unimaginable sufferings he endured. He was not burdened in this way for his own sins but for our sins, for the sins of all mankind. What suffering that must have been! By his obedient suffering he made up for the sins not just of two cities but of the whole world.

Let us unite ourselves to Jesus and entrust ourselves to his atoning sacrifice. The means *par excellence* for this is the Mass, by which Calvary is made present. Let us understand clearly that the Eucharistic sacrifice is the summit and source of our entire Christian life.



Wednesday of the thirteenth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 47 (46):2 All peoples, clap your hands. Cry to God with shouts of joy!

Collect O God, who through the grace of adoption chose us to be children of light, grant, we pray, that we may not be wrapped in the darkness of error but always be seen to stand in the bright light of truth. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Amos 5:15-15.21-24; Ps 50:7-13, 16bc-17;
Matthew 8:28-34

When Jesus arrived at the other side in the region of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men coming from the tombs met him. They were so violent that no-one could pass that way. What do you want with us, Son of God? they shouted. Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time? Some distance from them a large herd of pigs was feeding. The demons begged Jesus, If you drive

us out, send us into the herd of pigs. He said to them, Go! So they came out and went into the pigs, and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and died in the water. Those tending the pigs ran off, went into the town and reported all this, including what had happened to the demon-possessed men. Then the whole town went out to meet Jesus. And when they saw him, they pleaded with him to leave their region. (Matthew 8:28-34)

Evil One of the most obvious features of any kind of society, be it human or not, is the presence of leadership — let us say, “authority.” Almost always in a pack of animals there is some kind of leader. In many cases the leader is “wired” to *dominate*, as we may say — we just have to think of the proverbial “top dog”. The “top dog” cannot bear seeing another dog being advantaged ahead of it, and persists in putting the other dog in the lower place. In human society, an authority of some kind is manifestly natural and needed. Very often, as with animals, the authority that emerges is gained by force and for motives of personal *dominance* over others. In human

society, authority ought be at the service of the entire society. But all too often it is at the service of those who hold authority or some favoured groups, while other segments are neglected or exploited. In the course of history, kings and tyrants have inherited, been given or have seized authority, and have exercised power according to their lights and moral condition. Rulers have enacted laws, but generally in history the laws have been the result of, and subject to, the discretion of the rulers. That is to say, the ruler is supreme and his law is the instrument of his will. But over the past half-millennium, there has been one singular and wholesome development in the Western idea and practice of authority — it is the theoretical supremacy of *law*, rather than the *ruler*. Instead of law being subject to the will of the ruler, all, including the ruler, are seen as subject to law. At times in the past this principle has been imposed by those who are lawless — such as during the Terror of the French Revolution when the monarch was executed. The lawless ones who had the power executed the monarch because he was accused of

breaking the law — which was *their* law. The general principle of the supremacy of law has come into its own, at least in much of the West. What remains to be done is to ensure that the civil law is in accord with a higher law — the *moral* law, for very often (in the West) it is not. Still, it is realized that a crime is *criminal*, and wrongdoing is seen to deserve its punishment. For all the philosophical debates over the existence of free will and objective morality, society and the common sense of man insist that some things are good and other things are bad, and you must not do what is bad. You must avoid the doing of evil. If you do not, it might mean a capital punishment for you, even if you are a king.

But while this is so in general terms, society also has the haziest notions of the moral and good life, and has little idea of the depth and complexity of elements involved in moral evil. Despite the practice of society in calling people to account for their decisions, nevertheless many (very well educated persons) reduce choice and decision to the effect of the past, or to one's inner make-up, or to social or family

environment. True free will is denied. On the other hand, those who accept the fact of free will and therefore of personal responsibility, often think that the moral evil that is so widespread in the world can be reduced merely to personal decision and its effects. The terrible catastrophes of vast wars, conflicts and ruthless sufferings during the twentieth century are seen as simply due to the immoral decisions of such persons as Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot and others of that ilk. But the evil in the world is not as simple as that — and this brings us to our Gospel passage today (Matthew 8: 28-34). We have before us in our text the stunningly moral figure of Jesus Christ, the peerlessly holy One, divine holiness incarnate, the One whom the demons accused of being “the Holy One of God”. He is the exemplar for all time of the moral life in its perfection — and, as we know, he is its true source for fallen man. But what do we see confronting him? Is it just, say, a conglomerate of a-moral forces? Obviously not. Is it simply the immoral decisions of men opposing the Holy One of God? No — there is more to the moral evil

portrayed in our scene today than the decisions of free men or the forces of this world. There is also the *demonic*: “*When Jesus arrived at the other side in the region of the Gadarenes, two demon possessed men coming from the tombs met him. They were so violent that no one could pass that way. What do you want with us, Son of God? they shouted. Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?*” There is a *demonic* world at work in this world of ours. Indeed, it had taken possession of the two unfortunate men who came from the tombs to meet our Lord. The reaction of the local pagan population to the deliverance effected by Christ also suggests a demonic darkness that had benighted them. This, then, is a very obvious lesson from our scene, a lesson for the modern secular world which knows the fact of evil and crime, but reduces it all to forces (such as free will or the environment) operating in this world alone. There is another unseen world of great good and great evil, and this unseen world is operating within our own, influencing

those disposed to receive its influence. In a word, there is the Supernatural.

Let us remember the first pages of the Holy Scriptures which take us back to the beginnings of the world — not as a scientific and historically documented account. Rather, it is the divinely-inspired account of the basic things that occurred and which are relevant for all time. God created the world and man, and man was made in his image endowed with great gifts of nature and grace. But he sinned and this was the mother of all catastrophes. And what was involved in the deed? Just the decision of the man and the woman — their bad decision alone? No — there was also the Serpent who insinuated itself into a conversation with the woman and having gained her, then gained the man. There is an unseen world that is of immense moral benefit to man and of immense moral danger to him. Let man beware, then.



Thursday of the thirteenth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 47 (46):2 All peoples, clap your hands. Cry to God with shouts of joy!

Collect O God, who through the grace of adoption chose us to be children of light, grant, we pray, that we may not be wrapped in the darkness of error but always be seen to stand in the bright light of truth. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Genesis 22:1-19; Ps 114; Matthew 9:1-8

Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town. Some men brought to him a paralytic, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven. At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, This fellow is blaspheming! Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get

up and walk'? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. . . . Then he said to the paralytic, Get up, take your mat and go home. And the man got up and went home. When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to men. (Matthew 9:1-8)

Forgiveness of sin One of the obvious differences, among very many, between the religions of the peoples of classical times and the religion of Israel (as expressed, say, in its inspired writings) turned on the matter of sin. Sin is openly at the forefront of the revealed religion of Israel, whereas in the religions of the nations, offences against the gods had little of the status of “sin.” The gods were not to be offended, but this was because they were powerful and their help had to be obtained. “Sin” was not such because of the holiness of the gods – except to a meagre point. An action was wrong because it *irritated* the gods, or conflicted with their preferences and wishes. The gods themselves were scarcely holy in the understanding of the term obtaining in the revealed religion of Israel. They

were not a lot better than humans, but they had a degree of power over the course of the world. Nor was the heaven of the gods a particularly holy place — in fact in many respects it was sordid, and the scene of conflict and base motivation. What was imperative was that the inhabitants of this world gain their co-operation and favour for the attainment of temporal success. If one was at sea, or at war, it was no use to have the god of the sea or the god of war disinterested in one's prospects. It would be worse, of course, if one had the relevant gods acting against one's interests because of a foolish or short-sighted irritation of their persons, or because other humans with opposite interests had obtained their favour. In the religion of Israel as bequeathed to the chosen people by the Patriarchs, the Judges, Moses, David and the prophets, "sin" was a very serious matter indeed because, being "sin," it offended the *Holy One* of Israel — the Lord God. Despite the anthropomorphism of many of the depictions of Yahweh God in the Old Testament texts (his wrath, his commands to destroy, etc.) all knew that God was the *sinless* One. His

principal intent was not that he be not irritated or inconvenienced, but that sin be banished from the life of man. So serious was sin that God promised punishment for it and the withdrawal of his divine, protective presence if it was wilfully pursued. *Be holy, for I am holy*, said the Lord God of Israel. The catastrophes of the chosen people were taught to be due to “sin.”

Further, of course, only God could forgive sin. This was virtually taken for granted, and the rituals, sin-offerings and prayer of the religion of Israel appealed to God alone for the forgiveness of sin. Some of the greatest prayers of the Old Testament appeal to God for the forgiveness of sin, and imbued in these prayers is the awareness that only God can grant this pardon. The hope is that God in his mercy will grant it — but of course there was no declaration of this pardon in the normal course of events. Man could only hope, pray and trust that God in his goodness and compassion would grant it. Of course, it was unheard of that any Patriarch or prophet would arrogate to himself any power to act on God’s behalf in

such a sacred matter as the forgiveness of sin. Sin pertained to the very personal relationship between God and the individual or the people, and only God could do anything there. The rituals and sin-offerings were prayers for forgiveness and acts of faith and trust, but were not declarations of the forgiveness of sin. No priest or prophet or king could make such a declaration on God's behalf — for they were sinners too and depended themselves on faith in God's pardon. The prophetic and priestly tradition exhorted the chosen people to appeal for this pardon and to hope in God's mercy — but it did not as such firmly and regularly declare it to have been granted. Indeed, one may say that an essential part of the purest Messianic expectation and prophecy was precisely that this forgiveness would be *forthcoming*. It was an essential part of the coming Blessing for the people, and for the peoples. God in his goodness would do it. It is in this general context that we ought situate our Gospel passage today (Matthew 9: 1-8). It portrays the unprecedented wonder of the forgiveness of sins being granted by the man Jesus of

Nazareth, calmly, with supreme assurance, without the slightest ambiguity, and all this before the masters of the Law — the “scribes” (Matthew 9:3). Further, it was immediately followed by a spectacular act of God. The paralysis of the man forgiven his sins was taken away. Here there was an explicit forgiveness of sin, declared publicly, and exercised by a man — not a mere man, but by a man nevertheless.

There had been nothing like it in the history of Israel, but it marked the beginning of a new era in revealed religion. The multitudes marvelled that “*such power had been given to men*” in the person of Jesus of Nazareth (Matthew 9:8). It was a power that was his by nature, for he was divine — and he would give this power “to men” in the persons of his chosen Apostles. On the very day he rose from the dead he breathed on them the Holy Spirit, and thereupon gave them the power to forgive sins (John 20: 22-23). Thereafter this power to forgive sin, coming from Jesus Christ, would be exercised in the life of the Church by the ordained ministerial priesthood. Let us

marvel at this power as did the crowds, and avail ourselves frequently of its blessings.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 9:1-8)

“Seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralytic, ‘Courage, son, your sins are forgiven’” It is notable how very frequently our Lord links his saving activity to the faith of those who come to him asking for his help. He usually wants to know if they believe, or seeing that they so believe, he proceeds to grant them what they need — be it sight, dispossession from demons, or whatever. Even after the event he assures a person that his faith saved him — as with the woman healed of her internal bleeding. Of course, his miracles were to point to far greater saving acts — salvation from sin and sanctification. It is this which Christ came most of all to offer, and again, in this he looks for faith in the one coming

to him. In today's Gospel a paralytic is brought to him for healing. This time there is a new step, for "*seeing their faith, Jesus said to the paralytic 'Courage, my child, your sins are forgiven'.*" It seems that our Lord divined that it was the paralysed man's consciousness of sin which was his special burden — together, of course, with his paralysis — and in the face of which he needed courage. Yet he and his friends ("seeing their faith") had the faith that our Lord was looking for to receive spiritual blessings.

We too in approaching our Lord for the heavenly blessings he wishes to give — the forgiveness of sins and sanctification — must approach him with a lively faith as did the paralytic and his friends. All too often it is this which we lack, and the upshot is that we do not ardently ask for what we spiritually need, and do not recognise the presence and power of Christ before us.



Friday of the thirteenth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 47 (46):2 All peoples, clap your hands. Cry to God with shouts of joy!

Collect O God, who through the grace of adoption chose us to be children of light, grant, we pray, that we may not be wrapped in the darkness of error but always be seen to stand in the bright light of truth. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Amos 8:4-6.9-12; Ps 118; Matthew 9:9-13

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. Follow me, he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'? On hearing this, Jesus said, It is not the

healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. (Matt. 9:9-13)

Holy love In popular Greek classical religion, Zeus was the father of gods and men. He was king on Mount Olympus (an important present tourist site in Greece), which was the home of the Greek gods. Living amid the heights, he controlled the lightning and thunder which he used as weapons. He was the father of many Greek heroes and mated with many mortals and goddesses — and was, incidentally, married to his sister Hera. He was the closest in the myths to an omnipotent ruler of the world, but was very far from being all-powerful. Most notably and obviously, he was not a moral authority nor an embodiment of the moral life. Indeed, he was all-too human and even, perhaps, worse. He was an agent and a victim of fate. As king of the gods he overthrew his father Cronus who became lord of the universe after ousting his own father. That Cronus was overthrown and imprisoned by his son Zeus (and Tartarus) indicates the power of fate

in Greek religious myth. Even Zeus was destined to be overthrown by one who was coming, and his future overthrow kept Zeus anxious. He had little pity for mortals and he toyed with humans heartlessly — he had little sympathy and ruined the lives of many women for his pleasure. There was another side to Zeus, though, for he was the divine upholder of justice for gods and humans. For the ordinary non-professional historian, the supreme god Zeus looks like a very high magistrate of classical times with his numerous immoral foibles. Other examples could be given of the gods of popular religion — Aristotle had little time for all this. He proposed the First Cause, the Unmoved Mover, whose essence consisted in self-thinking Thought: “*the divine thought thinks (since it is the most excellent of things), and its thinking is a thinking on thinking*” – *estin hê noêsis noêseôs noêsis*. (*Metaphysics* 12.9; 1075b 34). Aristotle’s penetrating grapple with the ultimate metaphysical principles of the world was a great achievement, and it came to have a lasting effect on Christian philosophy. But it hardly provided popular

religion with a living divine Agent. The divine Beyond remained beyond man in terms of a living relationship that was open to him — to man who knows he is called to a moral life. For the serious religious seeker, it is with relief that Revealed Religion appears in human history: there is discovered to be but *one* God, and he is *all-holy*.

Let us never lose our sense of wonder at the amazing religion that Christianity is. When I speak of the “Christian religion”, I am especially speaking of the Person of Jesus Christ. He is not just the Teacher of the Christian religion, as Mahomet is the teacher of Islam and Zarathustra the teacher of Zoroastrianism. He is the Object of the Christian religion, as God is the Object of all true religion. He is the One whom the Christian worships, loves, imitates, and draws on for all lasting life. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life, the only way to the Father, the Light of the world, the one revelation of the Father and the only name by which men are saved. In contemplating him, one contemplates the Father, God. He and the Father are one in Being, one in the Divine Spirit of Love. In him, the

vagaries of human thought, the impressive though limited searchings of philosophy, and the universal religious quest of man, have their Answer. In him, what God is like and the divine plan for man are revealed. But what is the most amazing thing that Jesus shows about God? It is that God is *Love* — holy and merciful Love. Yes, God is a moral God and cannot abide sin in the sense of an ultimate and lasting acceptance of it. Sin will never do, when it comes to being in the presence of God. Hence the perpetrator of sin must repent, and sins will bring their due deserts. God's holiness requires holiness of his creatures. This is an obvious difference from the gods and the religions of the peoples. But especially surprising is the revelation that God *loves* the sinner, while, of course, hating the sin. He loves the sinner and is full of merciful compassion for him. He will save, unless the sinner chooses to set his face against the divine mercy and remain in his sin. This brings us to our Gospel passage for today (Matthew 9: 9-13), where we see the incarnate Son of God responding to sinners. *“As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man*

named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. Follow me, he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples." The religious leaders demanded an explanation, and our Lord gave it: *"go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

This is a fundamental key to the reading of the entire Scriptures, and especially of the New Testament — and most especially of all, the Gospels. God is revealed as rich in mercy. *God is Love*, as St John defines him in his inspired Letter, and this Love shows itself as Mercy — mercy for man who is debilitated so profoundly by sin and its terrible effects. Christ calls Matthew the Tax Collector, the sinner, to follow him. This Gospel scene is emblematic of God's revealed dealings with mankind. Let us pray to appreciate the loving mercy of God, and to trust in it.



Saturday of the thirteenth week in Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: Amos 9:11-15; Ps 84; Matthew 9:14-17

Then John's disciples came and asked Jesus, How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast? Jesus answered, How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast. No-one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do men pour new

wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved. (Matthew 9:14-17)

Bridegroom

What is distinctive about Christianity? This is an important question because the answer to it reveals to the Christian where his principal focus and emphasis ought lie. For instance, is it that we should love God with all our mind, heart, will and strength — and our neighbour as ourself? This requirement is essential, of course, and when this is being done, sanctity is present. This is precisely what our Lord himself did — but it cannot be said to be the distinguishing feature of *Christian* teaching, for it was taught by *Moses* too. Our Lord quotes from the Book of Deuteronomy in giving this answer to the question about the most important commandment of the Law. The God of historical revelation requires of his people a total love for him, and Jesus Christ re-iterates this. Is it, then, love for neighbour? Well, the Old Testament insistently demanded this, and the

prophets condemned a religion of sacrifices and holocausts which turned a blind eye to injustices and lack of compassion for the suffering. Our Lord was not teaching a new precept when he told the parable of the Rich Man and the Poor Man Lazarus who, when he died, was taken by the angels to the bosom of *Abraham*. The Rich Man was buried in hell because he totally neglected to assist Lazarus who continually lay at his gate. A great deal of the moral teaching of Jesus Christ was already contained in the Law and the Prophets. Some of it was and is present in the natural moral law, accessible to the conscience of man and reflected in civil laws and non-Christian religions. Christ's teaching on the being and personhood of God assumes and often repeats what was already revealed — God's oneness, holiness, power, wisdom, goodness, love, and his limitless richness. Of course, it is not a mere repetition of prior revelation — very importantly, it involves a great fulfilment of what was already revealed. *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them”* (Matthew

5:17). It looks as if our Lord was appearing to some as coming with something that *replaced* and *abolished* the Law and the Prophets. But no — rather, “*unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven*” (5:20).

The most distinctive thing about the Christian religion is the very *Person of Jesus Christ*. He himself is the most distinctive feature of all religion — that is, of all the religions and philosophies of the world. Not only is this apparent to the Christian “insider”, as we may call him, but also to many outside the Christian pale. Pope Benedict XVI, in the first volume of his work entitled *Jesus of Nazareth*, refers to the significance of the observations on Jesus Christ made by the Jewish scholar, Rabbi Jacob Neusner in his book, *A Rabbi talks with Jesus*. Indeed, the Pope writes that “I have been greatly helped by the book” (p.103). Presumably he means that what Neusner writes greatly confirms what Benedict knew and now repeats. Neusner, posing a dialogue with Jesus, compares the words

of Jesus with those of the Old Testament and with the rabbinic traditions, and asks what Jesus added. What he added was “Himself” (p.105). Jesus’ own self is central to his message and this gives everything a new direction. Perfection, the state of being holy as God is holy, as demanded by the Torah, now consists in following Jesus and in living by his spirit. This is the essentially new element in which the message of Jesus diverges from the faith of traditional Israel. Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath. He is the Torah, the word of God in person. His disciples, in him, are the new Israel. Neusner the Jew sees very clearly that the most distinctive thing about the teaching and religion of Jesus Christ is the very Person of Jesus himself. All this brings us to our Gospel passage today (Matthew 9: 14-17), in which we read that “*John’s disciples came and asked Jesus, How is it that we and the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast? Jesus answered, How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.*” It

is to be noted that according to John's disciples, there was nothing very distinctive about the life of piety instilled by John — it was similar to that of the best Pharisees, except perhaps, we may add, for its greater purity. For instance, both they and the disciples of the Pharisees fasted — but those of Jesus “*do not fast.*” That was an obvious difference, and would have led many to think that something new in religion was afoot. What was new, then? The new thing was Jesus himself, his very own Person.

Jesus was the “bridegroom” who was now with them: “*How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is still with them?*” No prophet had referred to himself as the “bridegroom”. This was a hallowed term, and in the Prophets it had been used by God to describe himself in relation to his chosen people. They were his spouse, he their Husband. The history of the chosen people had been described by the prophets, speaking in the name of the Lord, in terms of spousal fidelity. So then, the “bridegroom” was now present and among his disciples, and in Jesus and his disciples there was present the new

Israel that possessed and offered the Kingdom. That Kingdom was God's lordship as present in Jesus, accessible to all those in union with him by faith and Baptism. Let us draw near to the bridegroom, then, and never leave his side.



Fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 48 (47):10-11 Your merciful love, O God, we have received in the midst of your temple. Your praise, O God, like your name, reaches the ends of the earth; your right hand is filled with saving justice.

Collect O God, who in the abasement of your Son have raised up a fallen world, fill your faithful with holy joy, for on those you have rescued from slavery to sin you bestow eternal gladness. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Zechariah 9:9-10; Psalm 144;

Romans 8:9.11-13; Matthew 11:25-30

At that time Jesus said, I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one

knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:25-30)

Rest for your soul There are those who understand “rest,” “repose” and “happiness” as being something very physical, perhaps exclusively physical. It could be watching a show on television, or having a very enjoyable meal. Another person looks to gaining some position in life and in his work as his best satisfaction and happiness. For another, it could be some outdoor exercise such as a walk through bushland. It could be some form of reading or an evening of conversation and companionship with friends. It could be harmony within the family. It is obvious that the notions of “happiness,” “contentment” and “rest” in life vary enormously among individuals and societies. Furthermore, it is also obvious to most that there

are different degrees or qualities of happiness which this or that benefit brings to man. If you win a great lottery and suddenly find yourself a wealthy person, this will probably bring you a certain degree of “happiness” and what we might call “rest for your soul”. But the euphoria of this will pass away — as you will, in your more lucid moments, understand. Such a turn of events could even bring unexpected anxieties. Further, most would know that to have a lot of money at one’s disposal will not bring the happiness of other things — say, an excellent marriage. So, ordinary human experience, common sense and clear-headed reflection will indicate that if one is to be truly happy in life one has to think very carefully about one’s goals, and just as carefully about the means to attain them. One will not be “happy” *simply* by indulging in one’s favourite pastime such as watching a favourite television series, going for a walk through bushland, or having an evening with friends. A certain degree of happiness or contentment is attained by these means. While truly noble pursuits such as the fostering of a harmonious family life

will bring its joy and happiness, the deepest happiness does not come simply from things such as these. Coincidentally, it will be noticed that all these things, of themselves, are temporal blessings. They goals and benefits for this life. So the question arises in the heart of the reflective person, wherein is the truest and greatest happiness in life to be found? Just as important is the question, how is this to be determined anyway?

The fact is that we can spend the whole of life seeking happiness, and finding a degree of it by trial and error and personal reflection, but ultimately never really gaining it. I am sure that there are great numbers of persons in this position. Many never attain deep happiness in life. Indeed, many come to the conclusion that the question cannot be resolved — so they give up on it and settle for whatever life happens to offer. Many others finally put their trust in this or that philosophical authority or great religious leader. Aristotle's thoughts on happiness could be the final path that is chosen, or the way of Buddha — but have any of these put their finger on the true answer

anyway? There is this to be considered too, whether the very question is well put. That is to say, should I be simply “seeking my happiness,” or the path that will bring “rest to my soul”? Who is to say that by consciously seeking my “happiness” as such I will ever be likely to attain it? This is an important question because there is another fundamental consideration that arises in the soul of everyone that is not, on the face of it, the same as his natural quest for happiness. I refer to the natural aspiration and obligation *to do what is right*. It is part of his fundamental experience that man senses and knows that he should do what is objectively right. He has a conscience commanding him to fulfil the moral law, whether it brings him “happiness” and “rest for his soul” or not. In fact, the dictate of his conscience may seem to upset his “happiness” altogether, and require of him that he forgo all that he thinks will bring him happiness. So what are we to do? What is man to do in the face of these fundamental questions in life, questions that relate to his call to be good, and yet to be happy? There are philosophers who give up on the question and

say that life is objectively without meaning. To this conundrum comes the answer from heaven. God has intervened with the sending of his divine Son to enlighten man in respect to the true path of life. Happiness will come from doing what one should do — and this means, in the concrete, coming to Jesus Christ and accepting his “yoke”. *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light”* (Matthew 11: 25-30).

There is an answer to the yearnings of man for goodness and happiness, an answer to the imperatives that arise from his heart requiring that he do what is right and that he set wisely on the path that will bring rest to his soul. The answer is in knowing, loving, following and serving the person of Jesus Christ. We must come to him, meet him as a real, living person, fall in love with him, and follow him faithfully and with a full heart in everything. That is God’s answer to man’s need, and it is the purpose

for which man was made. Christ promises to give rest to our souls — and the saints show that this is so, just as Christ himself showed that it is so. Go to Jesus Christ, then! Stake all on him! Be prepared to forgo anything that might interfere with where he takes you. Happiness and rest for your soul will be the upshot. Most assuredly so.



Monday of the fourteenth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 48 (47):10-11 Your merciful love, O God, we have received in the midst of your temple. Your praise, O God, like your name, reaches the ends of the earth; your right hand is filled with saving justice.

Collect O God, who in the abasement of your Son have raised up a fallen world, fill your faithful with holy joy, for on those you have rescued from slavery to sin you bestow eternal gladness. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Hosea 2:16.17-18.21-22; Psalm 144;
Matthew 9:18-26

While Jesus was saying this, a ruler came and knelt before him and said, My daughter has just died. But come and put your hand on her, and she will live. Jesus got up and went with him, and so did his disciples. Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years

came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak. She said to herself, If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed. Jesus turned and saw her. Take heart, daughter, he said, your faith has healed you. And the woman was healed from that moment. When Jesus entered the ruler's house and saw the flute players and the noisy crowd, he said, Go away. The girl is not dead but asleep. But they laughed at him. After the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took the girl by the hand, and she got up. News of this spread through all that region. (Matthew 9:18-26)

Divine power Our Gospel scene today is reported by each of the Synoptic Gospels — Matthew, Mark and Luke. Matthew covers the event in nine verses. There are considerable differences between Matthew's account and that given by Mark and Luke. Mark gives to the event twenty-two verses, nearly three times the space of Matthew. Luke gives it seventeen verses, more than twice the length of Matthew. In both Mark and Luke we are given more information than Matthew about the man who

approaches Jesus. He is a leader of the synagogue and his name is Jairus. In Matthew's brief account, all we are told is that the man is "*a certain ruler*" without the further details about him given by the other two. While in Matthew the "*ruler*" approaches Jesus about his "*daughter*", in Mark (5:22-43) it is from the outset a "*little daughter*." In Luke (8:41-56) there are even more details about the daughter. The man tells Jesus that "*he had only one daughter, about twelve years of age*". One minor difference is also that in both Mark and Luke, Jairus "*falls at the feet*" of Jesus — whereas in Matthew the ruler "*worshipped him*." There is one notable difference between Matthew and both Mark and Luke. It is that in Mark and Luke, Jairus tells Jesus that his "*little daughter lies at the point of death*" — and asks that he come and heal her so that she may live. Jesus rises to follow him to his house, and on the way there is the healing of the woman who had an illness of blood-flow. At that point, news arrives of the death of Jairus's daughter. But in Matthew's account, the ruler tells Jesus that his daughter "*just now died*" (*arti*

etelut ēsen), and asks that our Lord “*come and lay his hand upon her and she shall live.*” In Matthew’s account, there is, of course, no news reaching our Lord after the healing of the woman on the way there, that the girl has died. All up, it seems that both Mark and Luke had more information about the event than did Matthew. Perhaps Matthew was not an eye-witness himself — it is interesting to notice that in Matthew’s account, his own call (Matthew 9: 9) was not long before this event (9:18-25). Perhaps Matthew was not in tow on this occasion and was recalling what he had heard, whereas both Mark and Luke may be reporting the account of the eye-witnesses — Peter, James, John. But in this we are speculating, and do not know.

What is clear in Matthew’s account is the simple and plain exercise of extraordinary power by Jesus Christ. The emphasis from the outset of the scene is on his divine power to grant life and health. Christ departs from where he was, following the “*ruler*” and destined to bring back to life his daughter, whom, we read a little later is (without learning her age) a “*maid*” or “*girl.*” He arrives at the

mourning and dirge of those present in the house of the recently deceased and asks them to go. Their lamentation is not in order, for the girl is “*not dead, but asleep.*” When the people had been put out — one wonders what they thought of the proceeding — he simply went in, took her by the hand and she arose. The further details provided by Mark and Luke are not given — the presence of Peter, James and John, the presence of both father and mother, the words our Lord used (*Talitha koum* — as in Mark), and our Lord ordering something to be given to her to eat. In Matthew we have the essentials of Christ’s exercise of divine power, simply exercised without public fanfare. There is a difference at the end, too. While in Mark and Luke Christ tells the parents that they were to tell no-one of it, Matthew informs us that “*the report of this went forth through the whole of that region.*” In all this, we have mentioned only the story as it touched the daughter of the ruler. On the way to the house there was, of course, the woman healed of her twelve-year infirmity of internal bleeding. Matthew’s account is simple and direct. The

woman came behind him, touched the hem of his garment with faith in the power of anything directly associated with the Person of Jesus Christ, and she was healed forthwith. Christ turned and when he saw her, immediately commended her for her faith. He assured her that it was this that made her whole — and the healing, Matthew tells us, was permanent. So then, apart from the narration of Christ's great power, we have the description of the *faith* of those who approached him. The ruler had faith in his complete power, as did the woman, and both were rewarded to the full. It is a typical event in the public ministry of our Lord, with the same straightforward lesson for us all.

Let us contemplate the person of Jesus Christ. He is unique in history, our Lord and our God. The fullness of the divinity is found in his Person. He is not only man, but the living God — God the Son become man, showing the compassion of God for each of us. God reveals his infinite power in his mercy. Let us place our faith in the divine mercy, then. This is surely the great lesson of today's

Gospel scene, a lesson to be learnt day by day over the years of life. *Your faith has made you whole*, our Lord said to the woman. Let us take his words to heart.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 9:18-26)

“Get out of here; the little girl is not dead, she is asleep”

If there is one thing that dominates human life and culture, it is the fact and the thought of death. Death is the mystery that affects everything, and if man does not succeed in finding meaning in it, all of life will appear to be meaningless. This is because whatever one does in life, one comes to an end at death. It seems, on the face of it, that one comes out of the darkness at birth only to disappear finally into the darkness of death. But let us notice how our Lord refers to death in today's Gospel. Referring to the little girl amid all the wailing and commotion, our Lord said that she was not dead, but

“asleep”. When his friend Lazarus died, our Lord said to his disciples that he was “asleep”. Of course, they had both died in the friendship of God — and so their state of death in God’s eyes was no more than “sleep”. All this is to say that the true meaning of death is very different from what man imagines it to be, apart from divine revelation.

Indeed, the true significance of death is grasped by pondering the death of Christ. It was the supreme moment of his self-surrender to the Father when the Father’s will was totally accepted. With this self-gift came transformation, including the transformation of the world. We are called to live with Christ, and at our death to die with him. Our death will then share in the significance and the value of his death.



Tuesday of the fourteenth week in Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: Hosea 8:4-7.11-13; Psalm 113b;

Matthew 9:32-38

While they were going out, a man who was demon possessed and could not talk was brought to Jesus. And when the demon was driven out, the man who had been mute spoke. The crowd was amazed and said, Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel. But the Pharisees said, It

is by the prince of demons that he drives out demons. Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. (Matthew 9:32-38)

The ultimate questions We read that “*while they were going out, a man who was demon possessed and could not talk was brought to Jesus. And when the demon was driven out, the man who had been mute spoke.*” Our Lord did not just heal the man of dumbness. A demon was involved. On another occasion our Lord was passing by with a crowd in tow, and a blind beggar began to shout for him. Our Lord asked that he be brought to him and he then asked, “*What do you want me to do for you?*” Master, the man replied, “*that I might see again.*” With that, our Lord

spoke and his sight was restored to him — there was no question of a demon being involved. In our scene today, a demon is causing the dumbness, and Christ drives out the demon — and so the man is restored to speech. But notice what the amazed crowd in our Gospel today said of Jesus and of the deed they had just seen him perform. “*Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel,*” they marvelled. The people could not recall from the past anything like what our Lord has been doing. When we think of the sweep of Scripture, indeed, nothing like it had been seen before. There was no disease or illness, not even death itself, and certainly no demon, nor any natural threat such as hunger or storms at sea, which our Lord could not effortlessly master and free man from. Time after time, in place after place, Christ showed himself the victor. His greatest victory was his Passion and Death by which he redeemed the world, though his enemies regarded it as his defeat. This statement of the crowds about Jesus Christ in our Gospel today (Matthew 9: 32-38), that nothing like him and what he was doing had been seen before, can be taken

as a broad summing up of Christ's unique status and significance. Yet despite all this, the response to him was extremely mixed. During his public ministry, there was adulation and euphoria from many in the crowds, and implacable hostility in many of the leaders. Some became his firm *disciples*, but they were the overwhelming minority. St Paul informs us that after Christ's Resurrection, five hundred of the brothers witnessed him as risen. But what were five hundred in the nation? Since the time of Jesus Christ, many have become disciples of the risen Jesus, but the great majority of humanity have not. Nothing like Jesus Christ has ever been seen — not only in Israel, but in the history of the world. Yet the response to him then, in the past, and now, has been and remains mixed.

What are we to say in comment about this unbelief? To a fair degree it is due to one's moral dispositions, which is to say because of what one basically wants and is ready to accept. For example, if one is not very interested in overcoming sin, then talk of "redemption from sin" will

evoke but a mild response, if any at all. While the lack of belief in Jesus Christ can be due to a formal rejection of him and his teaching, I suspect that for most who do not believe, it is due to a lack of interest. Indifference to religion, to God and to Jesus Christ, is the more common cause of modern irreligion. In turn, this is due to a lack of interest in and even consciousness of the more ultimate questions. We are very busy with our computers. We are busy with getting on in life and getting as near to the top as our peace of mind will allow. We are busy with our hobbies. We want entertainment. There is a constant humming of noise in our life and we are on the move. If we are not, we are pretty bored. What most people are not inclined to do is ask the deeper questions and ask them persistently. I knew one boy years ago who, soon after turning sixteen, resolved to do a little praying. In fact, on one occasion he resolved to say the Rosary really well, and during that Rosary he found himself thinking about life in the following way. He imagined himself at the age of seventy asking himself at that age, What have I done with

my life? He imagined his life nearing its end and he looked back. From that vantage point he could see very little in his life that was of value in the light of his approaching death and the judgment of God. So at the age of sixteen he found himself thinking of the very last things, the final things he would have to face — death and the judgment of God. I do not think many ask those simple but ultimate questions. In the case of that boy, very quickly he saw that he would have to change the course of his life. In fact, he thereupon decided to change his course, and there and then he chose Jesus Christ for his Master and Friend. He decided that his life, insofar as his own free choice was involved in the matter, would be a truly Christian life, a life of as much love for Christ as was possible for him, granted the grace of God. The boy had many ups and downs ahead of him, but in that goal he persevered. The point is that he asked the right questions, and the right answers came.

While religious unbelief has many causes, an important one is sheer indifference. This in turn is very often due to a lack of interest in, and consciousness of, the

ultimate questions. The ultimate questions are not abstruse. They are within the reach of the ordinary person — and indeed many eminent philosophers fail to raise them, but get side-tracked into matters that are peripheral compared to the fundamental ones. A great mind can miss the point, and an ordinary mind can be full of the point. The ultimate questions are straightforward and their answers are attainable by both the ordinary and the extraordinary person. We need the moral seriousness to ask them — and in this we can be helped by the thought of what might happen to us if we do not ask them. Let us understand, there are consequences for whatever we do.

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Second reflection: Persistence St Paul describes Abraham as our father in faith. The book of Genesis presents us with our fathers in faith — the patriarchs of the chosen people of God. God introduced himself to Moses in the burning bush as the God of those patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In Genesis we read the story of

Jacob (grandson of Abraham) and we see that a feature of his religious character was his strength. In some sense, he was strong with God. There was a struggle, and Jacob prevailed with God: presumably in his persistence with requests. He prevailed and obtained the blessing of God and went on to “*prevail against men*”. The example of this forefather in faith and ancestor of Christ reminds us that we too must live lives of fortitude in the face of difficulty. We must struggle. We shall never reach the goal God plans for us — of personal sanctity and effective service — if we remain weak in the face of difficulties. We must persist in beginning again and again when we fall and when we sin.

By our baptism we are in Christ. This means that we share in Christ’s life, and by his grace we are able gradually to make his virtues our own. This includes his fortitude which was the greatest the world has ever known. Time and again in the Gospels Christ said to those in difficulty: *Have courage! Be not afraid!* So, now I begin!



Wednesday of the fourteenth week in Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: Hosea 10:1-3.7-8.12; Psalm 104;

Matthew 10:1-7

Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and

Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' (Matthew 10:1-7)

Love for Jesus In the Gospel of St Matthew, soon after the commencement of his public ministry (in chapter 4), our Lord calls four of his principal disciples, Peter and Andrew his brother, and James and John his brother. They immediately leave their nets and follow him (4: 18-22). Our Lord then goes about all of Galilee preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom, and the summary of his teaching is given in the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7). Then there follow various healings, more teaching especially on faith (8:10-12) and discipleship (8:19-26), encounters with demons (8: 28-34), followed by further teachings and miracles (chapter 9). During this narrative

we notice various references to his “*disciples*” who listen to his teaching, as at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount (5:1), who follow him, or who express the desire to do so (8:21), and who accompany him in his work (8:25; 9:10-11; 9:14; 9:19). One special example of the “disciples” is Matthew (9:9). At one point Christ gazes at “the crowds” and says to “his disciples” that they should pray to the Lord of the harvest that he send forth labourers into his harvest (9:37-38). That remark alone shows that “the disciples” will do more than accompany the Master and learn his teaching. They will share in his very work. So it is that, in our passage today, our Lord takes a new step. We read that “*calling forth the twelve disciples*” he gave them certain powers (10:1). These were the Twelve, and they were deputed to act in his name, doing what they had seen him doing — casting out demons, healing all kinds of sickness (10:1), and preaching the news of the kingdom of heaven (10:7). The names of the “*twelve apostles*” (10:2) are given — five have been introduced already, including Matthew. Doubtless the others were

well-known to the infant Church, and in the list there was, as is to be expected, the sad name of Judas Iscariot, “*who also betrayed him*” (10:4). These twelve disciples, we read, Jesus sent forth to do what he had been doing, and Judas was among them. There is no reason to doubt that Judas showed the same promise as they. Perhaps he even had a certain edge on many of them, for we know he was entrusted with the money.

There must have been many such sorties sent forth by Christ, with Judas being ever a part of it. He would have healed by invoking the name of Jesus. He would have driven out demons by calling on the same name. He would have repeated the message he had heard uttered by the Master. He would have returned, like the others, to tell Jesus in his turn how things had got on, with Jesus gazing into his soul. We also know that things began to change in the heart of Judas — how soon, we cannot know. However, in his Gospel account of the public announcement of the holy Eucharist in the synagogue of Capernaum, St John tells us that many of Christ’s disciples

were profoundly disaffected. They turned away from our Lord as a result of what he had said and taught — it was too much, as far as they were concerned, this business of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. It was abundantly clear that Jesus meant what he said. He was not just playing with words, or using them in some purely symbolic fashion. Now, the sad thing here is that John tells us that when our Lord turned to the Twelve and received a full profession of faith by Simon Peter, he stated that one of them, one of those he had chosen, was “*a devil*” — and that he was referring to Judas (John 6: 70-71). That was a terrible judgment. Judas too, in his heart of hearts, had abandoned our Lord and was hostile to him — only secretly. Something had been failing to this point, and with Christ’s doctrine on the Eucharist, he fell away. Yet — and this also is interesting — he continued to be part of our Lord’s company and presumably continued to participate in the mission, the sorties, the ministry of the Twelve. Christ did not expose him and turn him out. He did not even have a quiet word with him and tell him to go. His

friendship and call had been given. It would not be withdrawn. What did Judas do in his mission with the others? After the raising of Lazarus from the dead, when Mary the sister of Martha poured costly ointment over the feet of Jesus, Judas criticised the action (John 12:4-6). One wonders whether privately he had criticised Christ in other contexts too. One wonders with what spirit he spoke of Jesus, and the slant he gave to the message of the Twelve, for his heart was far from him. How could he have spoken of Jesus with faith and love, as did the others?

Every baptized person is called to a personal friendship with Jesus and to a share in his mission. We are called to be his representatives before others in the situation and calling that is ours. But how can we possibly speak of Jesus with fruit and effect, *if our hearts are not with him?* It is impossible. The foundation of our calling as Christians is a personal love for Jesus Christ and full faith in his person and teaching. This depends on our life of prayer, our daily conversation with Jesus Christ. This was lacking in Judas as time went on. He began well, and

ended so very badly. The same can happen with us, if we do not take care. Let us take care, then! Let us stay close to Jesus Christ day by day by our daily prayer and our worthy reception of the Sacraments.

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Second reflection:

Go to Joseph! In the Book of Genesis we read of the patriarch Joseph, one of the twelve fathers of the tribes of Israel. The providence of God was strikingly manifested in his case, drawing him forth from the abject captivity into which he had been plunged by his jealous brothers. In the inspired account, God places him in a central position in the Kingdom of Egypt, and from this position he cares for his people, including his own family. The Pharaoh told the Egyptians, “*Go to Joseph.*” His story, as recounted in the biblical text, is full of lessons about the designs and loving providence of God. It also reminds the

Christian also of the great yet hidden Joseph who was to come. Within his holy obscurity at Nazareth he was given the task of caring for the Messiah and the Messiah's mother — just as the patriarch Joseph cared for Jacob and his sons, the fathers of the twelve tribes. The Church has declared Joseph, the husband of Mary and foster-father of Jesus, as not only the protector of the Holy Family but the heavenly protector of God's family, the universal Church.

Blessed Mary MacKillop used to say, "Go to Joseph". St Theresa of Avila called him her father and lord, as did St Josemaria Escriva. Joseph will protect us with his intercession which must be very, very powerful. How could God refuse him? Let us then "go to Joseph."



Thursday of the fourteenth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 48 (47):10-11 Your merciful love, O God, we have received in the midst of your temple. Your praise, O God, like your name, reaches the ends of the earth; your right hand is filled with saving justice.

Collect O God, who in the abasement of your Son have raised up a fallen world, fill your faithful with holy joy, for on those you have rescued from slavery to sin you bestow eternal gladness. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Hosea 11:1-4.8-9; Psalm 79;

Matthew 10:7-15

Jesus said to the Twelve, As you go, preach this message: 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give. Do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take

no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff; for the worker is worth his keep. Whatever town or village you enter, search for some worthy person there and stay at his house until you leave. As you enter the home, give it your greeting. If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that home or town. I tell you the truth, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.
(Matthew 10:7-15)

The mission Any historian worthy of the name, any anthropologist or archaeologist — anyone delving into the past or into the structures of human culture and society — understands that religion is virtually an invariable feature of the life of man. Societies have their worship, their rituals, their myths. Many societies, especially primal societies, are so steeped in a religious perspective that their culture and entire way of life, social and individual, is pervaded by religion. It is even difficult, in such cases, to

define religion because it seems to be so co-terminus with the culture. A great exception is the modern secular society, the special feature of which is that religion is absent from its public face. The secular society carries on officially as if God were but a personal persuasion rather than a public fact. Some modern states (such as Communist state of China), adopting a foreign philosophy such as Marxism, have publicly denied the reality of God. They have driven out those who profess religious belief. This they have done because, they think, belief in God is deleterious of man's true welfare. It has also to be admitted that some Asian cultures, profoundly influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism and other (what we might call) similar philosophies, have kept a *personal* Deity out of sight. But these are anomalies. Religion is part of the life of man — and what is religion, as popularly understood? Well of course, it is the worship of the deity or the deities; it is ritual; it is religious myth and narrative; it is prayer — it is all that makes up the acknowledgment of and prayer to the Unseen Power or powers, by man and his

community. But there is one feature of *revealed* religion, the religion of the Judaeo-Christian *revelation*, which is especially notable. It is its impulse to *bring and declare itself to the world*. God spoke to Abraham, calling him from Ur in the land of the Chaldees, and taking him to a promised land. We read in the Book of Genesis that within this call there was a promise: “*I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you All the families of the earth shall find blessing in you*” (Genesis 12: 2-3). The blessing of religion was not just to be for the family, tribe, society and nation of Abraham. The religion that was revealed to him as being his religion from now on, had a mission to the *world*.

This *universal* mission that was an original and essential feature of the religion of the chosen people was a long time in gestation. It was always understood to be there, but it never seems to have taken flight in any serious sense — until the appearance of the Messiah. John the Baptist pointed him out. He was Jesus, and his mission would be to take away the sin of *the world*. Once sin was

atoned for by his Death and Resurrection, the universal mission would be immediately operative. At that, “religion” — the religion revealed by God in the person of Jesus Christ his divine Son — became more than simple worship and, more than merely good and religious living. It also became *missionary*. Essential to its life was the mission to bring the knowledge and love of the Person of the Redeemer to the nations. Being “religious” involved bringing Christ to the minds and hearts of mankind. You could not just pray — as something solely between yourself and your Creator — or just worship — though this was essential. You had also to be concerned with bringing Jesus Christ to the world, both by means of your prayer and by means of the situation in life that was yours by vocation and divine Providence. So it is that in our Gospel today (Matthew 10: 7-15) our Lord entrusts his disciples with their mission. It is a share in his own mission. He himself did not enter the world simply to give an example of a “religious life” that acknowledged God his Father and which was lived in personal union with him. He came into

this world to save the *whole world* from sin. In him, religion was essentially missionary. If one wished, then, to be a child of God after the manner of Jesus Christ — and this is the only true way of being “religious” according to the revealed plan of God — then one had to share in the missionary impulse of the Master. One had to give oneself to the mission of saving mankind from sin and bringing all to God in Christ Jesus. So it is that “*Jesus said to the Twelve, As you go, preach this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven is near.’*” Risen from the dead, he gave his disciples a charge. It was not simply that they keep up the worship of God and remain deeply prayerful. They had a *mission to the world* that was central to living the religion of Jesus Christ: “*Go and make disciples of all the nations*” (Matthew 28:19).

If this missionary dimension of life is missing in the Christian person, his religion is profoundly incomplete. Of course, just how this missionary element is to be interpreted and lived out in practical terms will vary enormously among Christ’s faithful. The faithful wife and

mother will strive night and day to bring the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ to her family and to those about her, in her limited sphere of influence in parish and community. This will be a very different sphere from that of, say, the ordained priest. However, in all of Christ's faithful, in all who are baptized and are members of Christ's Church, there must be a living sense of mission which is given very practical expression in daily life. Let us be up and doing, then!

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Second reflection:

Forgiveness Our Lord ended his life on earth by asking his Father to forgive his persecutors, for, he prayed, they knew not what they were doing. In the Book of Genesis we read of the patriarch Joseph. His brothers had sold him into slavery, and finally they were in his power. With justice, he could have punished them. Instead, he

forgave them, recognising the hand of God in his own history. Despite their wickedness, God had brought Joseph to his position in order to save them from the famine, to preserve his chosen people for their divine destiny, and to display his power. *“Do not reproach yourselves”* he said, *“God sent me before you to preserve your lives”* (Genesis 45:5). The notable point in Joseph is forgiveness. Joseph forgave, and recognised the loving providence of God in his sufferings and in the injustices he had borne. Through them, God had been good to him and to his persecutors. Joseph is a type of Christ in this respect. Christ was rejected by his people and his rejection was the means whereby God saved his own people, and all the peoples.

Let us pray for the faith in God to recognise his hand in our life's hurts and injuries, and for the love of Christ that will enable us live in him with his spirit of forgiveness for those who hurt us.



Friday of the fourteenth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 48 (47):10-11 Your merciful love, O God, we have received in the midst of your temple. Your praise, O God, like your name, reaches the ends of the earth; your right hand is filled with saving justice.

Collect O God, who in the abasement of your Son have raised up a fallen world, fill your faithful with holy joy, for on those you have rescued from slavery to sin you bestow eternal gladness. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Hosea 14:2-10; Psalm 50;

Matthew 10:16-23

Jesus said to his Apostles, I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. On my account you will be brought

before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes. (Matthew 10:16-23)

Following him There are, of course, instances in the Old Testament, of prophets who had “disciples.” We can expect that over the long course of Old Testament religion, numerous religious leaders had disciples. Isaiah speaks of his disciples: “*Bind up the testimony and seal up the law among my disciples*” (Isaiah 8:16). Rabbinical Judaism made much of the concept of discipleship. The advice of a pre-Christian writer was: “*Take to yourself a*

teacher and acquire a companion.” Classical Philosophers had their disciples, as did the Jewish Rabbis. R. T. France has written that “Every Jewish teacher worth his salt had his circle of ‘disciples’ who ‘followed’ him (literally walking behind him as he rode or walked ahead), looked after his daily needs, and soaked up his teaching. Their teacher was the most important person in their lives” (*I Came to Set the Earth on Fire*, 1976, p. 50). There were, though, some notable differences between the idea of discipleship in Christ’s practice, and that of the Greek teacher or Jewish Rabbi. While commonly the disciple chose his master, Christ himself actively chose disciples, and he commanded his disciples to make other disciples, indeed to make disciples of all the nations. Most notably, one chose a master in order to gain *knowledge*. But in the case of Christ, being his disciple involved not only this, but principally it involved and required an ardent *love* for, and indeed *worship* of, his very Person. It was essentially a profoundly personal and definitive relationship of love, unto death. You did not move on to another teacher once

you gained the best that Jesus Christ had to offer. There was no other teacher apart from him, and anyhow, it was principally a matter of friendship issuing in obedience to his teaching. The disciple of Christ was called to follow him to the end, and that end was the Cross in some form. After asking three times of Simon Peter if he loved him more than the others, Christ's final words to him were, *Follow me!* (John 21). It would never have occurred to Aristotle to ask this of his students (say, Alexander, or the students of his academy at Macedon or Athens), nor to Isaiah to ask such a thing of his disciples. But Christ asked his disciples that they sacrifice everything for love of him and for the sake of his revelation. This was unique.

There is a further distinguishing point about Jesus Christ. He not only had "disciples" but "apostles." *Apostolos* means one who is sent forth, dispatched as an envoy — in other words, one who is entrusted with a mission, especially a foreign mission. It has, however, a stronger sense than a mere messenger. It means an envoy, a delegate, an ambassador. In the classical writers the

word is not all that frequent. In the Greek version of the Old Testament it occurs but rarely. In the New Testament, however, it occurs frequently, and denotes some disciples who were called to a specific role as legates of the Messiah who had come to establish God's Kingdom and extend it to all the nations. There was nothing like this in Old Testament religion. Christ's mission was to establish God's promised Kingdom on the earth, and he instituted the means of entering it. That means would be his Church built on the Twelve (who paralleled the twelve patriarchs), and specifically on the one he designated as the Rock, Simon Peter. The keys to the Kingdom were entrusted to him. Whatever he bound on earth would be ratified in Heaven. By entering this Church and partaking of its life, one would enter God's Kingdom — which was nothing other than union with Jesus Christ and living by his divine life. Not only had Christ apostles, but he sent them out with specific expectations and resources. The expectation was that they would suffer persecution, and their great resource would be the Spirit of the Father. He promised

that *“they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles.”* They did not have much to look forward to in terms of reception: *“Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me”*. That is to say, their path would be that of their Master. But they need not worry about how to bear witness in these circumstances: *“do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you”* (Matthew 10: 16-23).

The Church makes it clear in her teaching to all of Christ’s faithful that, in all of this, each baptized person has a share. In both discipleship — the business of learning from the Master, and in apostleship — the business of making disciples of all others, each baptized person is called by God to participate by vocation. All are called to

holiness of life and this, essentially, means following Jesus Christ. We are called to love him with all our heart, for he is God the Son made man and our Redeemer. We are called to accept his teaching in full faith, and we are called to share in his mission of making disciples of all the nations. Let us be up and doing, then!

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Second reflection:

Fidelity Our Lord in our Gospel passage today (Matthew 10:16-25) promises his apostles persecutions and difficulties in their share in his mission. But “*the man who stands firm to the end will be saved.*” In the Book of Genesis (46:1-30) there is narrated the happy ending to Jacob’s great sorrow, the loss of Joseph, the child of his love. Jacob was reunited with his long lost son. As Jacob leaves the land of Canaan for Egypt with his numerous possessions, we have the sense that God had blessed him

and was blessing him further for his faithfulness. The inspired author discerns in Jacob's temporal prosperity the hand of God. St Paul teaches this more generally in one of his Letters. God brings all things together for the sake of the ones who love Him. With the fullness of divine revelation having come to us in Christ, we know that material prosperity is not the principal way that God rewards those who are faithful to him. In Christ we receive every heavenly blessing. Christ lived poorly, dying in the midst of suffering, and breathing his last with nothing. He is our pattern, while being himself our reward.

Jacob illustrated this in material terms, and our Lord illustrates it perfectly in eternal terms. Let us, then, ask for the fortitude we need to be faithful, trusting in the faithfulness of God on our behalf.



Saturday of the fourteenth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 48 (47):10-11 Your merciful love, O God, we have received in the midst of your temple. Your praise, O God, like your name, reaches the ends of the earth; your right hand is filled with saving justice.

Collect O God, who in the abasement of your Son have raised up a fallen world, fill your faithful with holy joy, for on those you have rescued from slavery to sin you bestow eternal gladness. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 6:1-8; Psalm 92; Matthew 10:24-33

Jesus said, A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household! So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or

hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven. (Matthew 10:24-33)

Do not be afraid One of the mysterious wonders of nature is *awareness*. The insect and animal kingdoms possess no spiritual element in their constitution, and yet they have *awareness* as their foremost endowment. This fact shows the potential of matter, for from the insect to the most highly developed non-human animal, all are purely material. Awareness represents a great difference between

the mighty, living oak and the tiniest insect, and it places the insect above the great oak. The tiny insect is *aware* — not of itself, but of other things, while the towering, centuries-old tree is entirely *unaware* of anything. Yet both the insect and the tree are nothing more than matter. From the insect to the elephant, there is nothing that surpasses the material. Not so with the human being who, in his core Self, is not material. He is a spiritual soul informing a body. But now — and this is the point here — all things that possess some form of awareness are capable of fear. Take an insect — say, a fly. Something makes an approach to it — and the fly is gone. In its rudimentary form of awareness, it *fears* that approach. A flock of nightingales sing merrily together, and suddenly they all fall silent. The hawk has been seen, and they all *fear*. A herd of deer is grazing, and suddenly they raise their heads in alert — and they begin their frantic bounding from the scene. Two lionesses are charging them, and one of the deer is doomed. They all fear, and that fear drives their flight. A field of crops lies in sight and in the middle of it

there is a scarecrow. Why is it there? It is there to induce *fear* in the birds and keep them away, for the birds interpret the inert figure as a living man, who is a threat to them. Fear is everywhere. It is universal among all things that are aware. As a matter of fact, it is one of the greatest of blessings for every living thing, for without fear most things would be doomed as being entirely exposed to all kinds of threats. The cub strays out of its lair, unnoticed by its mother. It has not yet learnt to fear — and its short life is over. The sharp-eyed eagle sees, swoops and takes it. By the power of its awareness, with training from its parents or mentors, and with personal experience, living things learn to fear and that fear protects them from threats.

Man, too, is blessed by his ability to fear. How deprived a person would be without the tendency and capacity to fear! He would be doomed. But of course, the question is, *what* is it that we *should* fear? Fears can be imaginary. I can fear what people may say about me, when hardly any person is sufficiently interested to say anything about me at all. I can fear drinking coffee because of

something I have read, when what I have read is entirely unreliable. I can fear giving money to the poor because I fear exposing myself to personal deprivation — when any observer of my situation would say that deprivation is most unlikely. I can develop a constant fear of having a stroke because strokes are in my family — yet I am taking all medical precautions. My fears are out of control. Fear is a great blessing in life, provided we fear what we should fear. The question then is, *what* is it that we *should* fear? Some things constitute reasonable occasions of fear, and other things do not. Further, while fear can assist us in a reasonable manner to avoid authentic threats, fear can also paralyse us against acting rationally. It may be imperative that, for our own sake and for the sake of those who depend on us, we take certain actions. But fear can immobilize our decisions and action. Now, what we fear, and the degree to which we fear, will depend on what we are aware of. The level of our awareness, and what we are capable of being aware of, and our judgments based on that awareness, will determine the nature of our fears, and to a

point our power over them. The greatest cause of fear is the awareness of the threat of death — this is above all what makes the animal flee and the human recoil. But if a man knows that “death” is but a door to something unseen and far better, his awareness of this will transform the degree and nature of his fear. He may even come not to fear death at all. The famous Rosary priest of the middle of the twentieth century, Father Patrick Peyton, was once asked later in his life what was his attitude to death. He replied that he was *looking forward* to death because it was by passing through it that he would come to *meet Jesus Christ*, the love of his life. He would have told people to be aware of death, but not to fear it. Rather, fear offending God by committing sin.

So it is that in our Gospel today our Lord himself tells us not to fear certain threats — rather we ought fear other things. “*Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the*

ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows" (Matthew 10: 24-33). Let us place our whole trust in Jesus Christ, and govern our lives by his teaching as it comes to us in the witness and teaching of the Church. If we do this we shall fear what we should fear. Let us fear, but according to the mind of Christ.

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Second reflection:

Divine providence The Old Testament is read by the Christian as throwing fuller light on the New, and the New as giving meaning to the reading of the Old. The inspired story of Joseph is an instance of this. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers out of jealousy. God's hand was upon Joseph, and he was led to his high position in Egypt so that God's salvific purposes for his chosen people might be fulfilled. Jacob and his sons fled Canaan and its famine, and were able to find solace in Egypt

because of Joseph, whose position made this possible. After Jacob's death, Joseph told his brothers, "*Do not be afraid; is it for me to put myself in God's place? The evil you planned to do me has by God's design been turned to good, that he might bring about, as indeed he has, the deliverance of a numerous people.*" This was a type of what was to come in the life of Jacob's greatest descendant, the Messiah. Our Lord was the object of unparalleled rejection by his own: he *came unto his own and his own did not accept him*. But by God's design this evil was turned to good that he might bring about the deliverance of all his children. Salvation was brought to the human race by this rejection.

Joseph was a type of Christ, and of the power of the cross. Let us appreciate the power and wisdom of God in the folly of the cross, and let us ask for the faith to trust in God's care, whatever be the appearances.



Fifteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16):15 As for me, in justice I shall behold your face; I shall be filled with the vision of your glory.

Collect O God, who show the light of your truth to those who go astray, so that they may return to the right path, give all who for the faith they profess are accounted Christians the grace to reject whatever is contrary to the name of Christ and to strive after all that does it honour. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 55:10-11; Psalm 64;
Romans 8:18-23; Matthew 13:1-23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered round him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables,

saying: A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop — a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear. The disciples came to him and asked, Why do you speak to the people in parables? He replied, The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables: Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: ‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never

perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.' But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it. Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. But

the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. (Matthew 13:1-23)

The Sower Our culture is one that expects identifiable outcomes and achievements. We are expected to be achievers and to prove ourselves. If something goes wrong, we are blamed. Initiative, self-motivation and self-reliance in attaining goals, are expected. This tendency of our technical, pragmatic and goal-oriented culture can gradually form the impression that what life will bring depends on ourselves — which is correct to a point, of course. But ordinary observation makes it obvious that life does not depend simply on ourselves, for numerous other factors in the universe play their inexorable part. Nevertheless, this assumption can take root in our imagination, and can affect our image of the Christian life. Of course, as in every other department of life progress in Christ depends, to a point, on our own efforts. If we make no effort to pray, if we do not “work” on prayer, we shall

get nowhere. The fullness of the Christian life requires our incessant cooperation. But we can slip into thinking that everything in the Christian life depends on ourselves — and thus we become Pelagians, without realizing it. Individuals have their “plan of life” and churches their “pastoral plan,” and “success” can be (unconsciously) imagined as mainly dependent on the quality of personal effort. Now, in all of this, we must understand what our Gospel parable of today stresses, that everything *we* do is in fact dependent on what *God* is doing. The classic Protestant warning against “works” — which in the Catholic understanding was pressed so far as to become erroneous — has an abiding relevance. Our Gospel today gives us a vivid appreciation of the harvest of holiness that is possible for us. But it is not just a matter of our achieving plans that we set ourselves, but of God achieving the plans which from all eternity he has set himself — which of course depend on our co-operation too. God has his dreams, and he implants them in our hearts. They, the plans of God for us, are far greater than anything we could

deem possible. God sets the plans, and he is the one who achieves them. But he has chosen to depend on our free and generous cooperation. The co-operation that we give, itself the fruit of his grace, enables us to merit what is achieved. With that merit of ours will come our eternal reward — all the while being ultimately the work of grace.

In today's Gospel parable (Matthew 13:1-23), we imagine a sower going out to sow his seed. Some of the seed produces nothing because of the ground on which it fell. But the seed that fell on good soil "*produced their crop, some a hundred fold, some sixty, some thirty.*" This successful crop was entirely dependent on the sower casting his seed on the ground. That work of the sower and his seed is the work of grace. The soil did not do it, for without the sower and the seed, nothing would have been forthcoming. All through Scripture, it is God who takes the initiative. His are the plans, and his is the call that comes to this or that person to take up his plans and cooperate with them wholeheartedly. Abraham would never have quit his homeland and embarked on the

adventure he did, had he not received the call to do so from God, together with the divine promise. Abraham accepted the call, and God promised to be with him, working in and through him to achieve the plan. That is the pattern throughout salvation history, from Abraham our father in faith to Christ our Redeemer, and from him to the end of time in the life and mission of the Church. It is the pattern in the Christian life of each of us. I remember when I was young, a priest explained that holiness is 99% the work of grace, which is the action of God in our souls. Nevertheless, in the parable, the good soil had to be there. Our active cooperation is absolutely essential. God gives us the dignity of asking and requiring that *we* be generous and persevering *collaborators*. That is the other 1% of the work of our sanctification, and it requires everything we have. The poor widow put in two small coins, and it was everything she had. In this sense, our Lord's parable also shows that nothing can be done if we do not cooperate with God. That is why our "works" are necessary. If they are lacking, we will be like that stony ground, or that edge of

the path, or those thorns, which prevented the seed from bearing fruit. We must be like the good soil, receiving the grace of God and his word with active understanding and appreciation, together with the resolve to live consistently in accord with it.

It is in this sense that what we become depends on our efforts. But all our efforts depend on God. Our efforts are made possible only by God who attracts us to him and to his plan for us in the first place. He sustains us in our efforts to achieve what he plans for us. If God's entire plan for us is to be achieved we have to put in our full and daily effort. Our full and persevering co-operation is the 1% of the work. The rest, the 99%, is God's part — but even that 1% is possible only with his aid. Let us then give it our best effort, knowing that if we do this, God will do the rest.



Monday of the fifteenth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16):15 As for me, in justice I shall behold your face; I shall be filled with the vision of your glory.

Collect O God, who show the light of your truth to those who go astray, so that they may return to the right path, give all who for the faith they profess are accounted Christians the grace to reject whatever is contrary to the name of Christ and to strive after all that does it honour. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 1:10-17; Psalm 49;

Matthew 10:34-11:1

Jesus said, Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter in law against her

mother in law-a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.' Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me. Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man's reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward. After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee. (Matthew 10:34-11:1)

Loving Christ There are currents of Christian thought and practice which place great emphasis on the

study of the inspired writings of St Paul. The reflections on the Christian life which issue from such traditions and communities are replete with that great Apostle's teachings — as they are conceived to be — and often there is little reference to other books of the Scriptures. I suspect that this is because such persons tend to think that by comparison with the Letters of St Paul, the teaching on the Christian life that is contained in the rest of the New Testament, including the Gospels, pales in comparison. Luther was full of St Paul, but he seemed to give short shrift to the inspired writings of St James. Again, there have been writers and preachers from certain Christian traditions who make great use of the writings of the Old Testament. Now all this is good because we are talking here of Holy Scripture. But what I have often noticed is that frequently there is in them a corresponding lack of stress on the Gospels. I also often notice that they do not much connect the Old Testament passages they are using with the New Testament, and in particular with the Gospels. Specifically, they do not connect their passages

(from, say, the Old Testament) to the Person of Jesus Christ — who for the Christian is the summit and the key to all the Scriptures. This raises an important question. For the Christian, is there any grade of importance among the various Books of Holy Scripture, understood as embracing both Old and New Testament, or are all of equal importance, being all inspired? Well of course, there is indeed a grade or order of importance. The Christian who knows that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and Redeemer of mankind, also knows that the Gospels, for instance, are of greater importance than, say, the Old Testament Book of Numbers or Leviticus. This is because the Gospels present the person of Jesus Christ himself. The Books of Numbers and Leviticus, while having a connection with the promised Messiah, cannot compare with the Gospels in the presentation of him. In fact, we can indeed identify the most important Books of the Bible. They are the four Gospels, for they explicitly present the teaching and very person of the Redeemer himself.

There is a further consideration in respect to the pre-eminence of the four Gospels. It is of course fundamental that we progress towards a deeper understanding of the teaching of Jesus Christ so as to be able to live by it. The various Books of the New Testament, and in a different sense those of the Old Testament too, help us know the teaching of Christ. But it is especially important that we come to know, love and wish to follow the very Person of Jesus Christ. Needless to say, we cannot separate the teaching of Jesus Christ from his Person — and the Letters of St Paul help us know his teaching and Person. *If you love me*, Christ said, *you will keep my commands*. Notwithstanding this, it is essential to the Christian life that we come to know and love *Jesus himself*, and not simply, as it were, his teaching. We strive to know his teaching *because we love him*. It is conceivable for a person to approve highly of the teaching of Jesus and to follow much of the Christian “system” because of its inherent merits, while not having a correspondingly high interest in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, risen

and alive in his body the Church. If this is what a person's Christianity amounts to, there is a real question as to whether he is yet a Christian. A Christian is one who loves, worships, follows and serves a particular Person, the Person of Jesus Christ. It is this which is first and foremost, and one's desire to know Christian teaching and to live by it is the fruit of a personal love for Jesus Christ, who is recognized as being God himself. Christ wants more than the observance of his commands — though this is absolutely essential. He wants us to love him, for himself. The mission and way of life of the Christian is based on this love. Simon, he asked Peter three times after having risen from the dead, *Do you love me?* Then *feed my sheep*. Love for him comes *first*. So it is that in our Gospel today our Lord insists on being supreme in our hearts. *“Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of*

me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 10:34-11:1).

This is why the Gospels are the most important books of the Bible. They present the Person of Jesus Christ for our contemplation and our love. By immersing ourselves prayerfully in the Gospels day by day and contemplating his very Person, we come to know and love him as the Object of our life. His teaching is constantly perceived as coming from his lips, and is accepted and followed for love of him. I wonder if Luther gave more time to St Paul’s Letters than to the four Gospels. The Christian lives in Christ by grace, and he lives in him by conscious thought and love — and the Gospels are the principal nourishment in the Scriptures for this. Every day, in the presence of Jesus Christ, let us read a little of the Gospels so as to know and love him better.

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Second reflection:

All dependent on God One of the intriguing features of the progress of God's work as we notice it in the pages of Scripture is that often it occurs precisely in unfavourable and discouraging circumstances. We notice this in the Book of Exodus: "*But the more they were crushed, the more they increased and spread, and men came to dread the sons of Israel*" (Exodus 1: 12). Even from what we might call a purely natural point of view, this suggests one very important lesson if our goals in life are to have any lasting value. If there is a God — and of course there is — a God who in his providence is active in the world, then we ought do what he, our God, wants to see done. As the Psalm says, *unless the Lord builds the house, they labour in vain who build* (127:1). That which lasts in a truly ultimate sense must be what God is wanting, doing and supporting. The fullest manifestation of this is in the life, passion and death of Christ. All appeared left in ruins, and from those apparent ruins came the salvation of the world, and the Church that would bring this salvation to the

peoples. God's power is at its best in obedient weakness, as was revealed to St Paul.

Let us get behind what God is wanting, doing and supporting, and make it our own. In the business of doing God's will daily, let us never be discouraged to the point of losing faith. Faith in God's presence and power must be the foundation of our entire religious life. Faith in God and obedience to his will is what will build the house. Apart from this basis, all is in vain.



Tuesday of the fifteenth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16):15 As for me, in justice I shall behold your face; I shall be filled with the vision of your glory.

Collect O God, who show the light of your truth to those who go astray, so that they may return to the right path, give all who for the faith they profess are accounted Christians the grace to reject whatever is contrary to the name of Christ and to strive after all that does it honour. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 7:1-9; Psalm 47; Matthew 11:20-24

Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in

sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you. (Matthew 11:20-24)

The miracles of Jesus There are several features of the modern era that are distinctive to it. One is its scientific and technological character. Science and its technological applications are the pride of modern times. That something is manifestly vindicated by science is deemed to be one of its best credentials. This has been an outstanding gain for the world, but there has been a negative feature in this, jockeying for prominence. It is that very many have assumed that the *only* criterion of the truth of something is its scientific and empirical validation. Thus has the supernatural been gradually and commonly relegated to the dustbin of the unreal. It has no “scientific”

proof. It cannot be empirically tested. Another notable feature of the culture of the modern era is its widespread atheism, or at least its agnosticism in respect to theistic beliefs. There is no God, or at least it is impossible to be certain of his existence. There is commonly in modern man, the man of the modern Western culture and those cultures affected by Western secularism, a profound scepticism and doubt about the supernatural and in particular about God. The doubt is not necessarily active, strident, nor promoted. It can even be granted that there is a higher Power, but whether this Power transcends the world, or whether It is personal, whether It is kind or disinterested or threatening, all these questions are left unanswered while the real business of life is taken in hand. The real business of life is, of course, the material business of life — doing well in this world. The question then arises, what would prove the existence of God, or his character as claimed by the great religious traditions such as that of Christianity, and in particular the fact of an historical revelation by him in the person of Jesus Christ?

There are a number of “proofs” in philosophical and religious thought, but let the question be directed to the sceptic — tell me, what would you regard as a true proof of the fact of God and of the divinity of Jesus Christ his Son and Representative? I tend to think that in his heart of hearts, the modern doubter would require that he actually *see* something of it. The proof that would convince him is not a purely rational argument but *observable* facts.

This, I suggest, is one reason why the age-old stress on and recourse to miracles is of relevance. They happened. They were seen. They were observable facts, or claimed to be such. Now, while on the one hand there are many who show a great interest in “miraculous” phenomena, the more general tendency is opposed to this. Typically, there is a powerful, unspoken and even scarcely conscious assumption that “miracles” are so utterly *unlikely* that reports of them lack all credible foundation. A miracle is of the category — the assumption goes — of tricks, of imaginative fancies, of religious inventions, of popular undisciplined fables, and a host of other utterly

impossible phenomena as to render the miracle useless as a means of persuasion. Is the magician's trick a "miracle"? What of reports of ghosts and flying saucers? All the so-called "miracles" are of that order. So the miracles of the Gospels are discounted because they run against what is deemed to be *likely*. So there is much to do to overcome the modern disinterest in miracles and the assumptions underlying and powering this disinterest. The work of, for instance, Bishop Tom Wright, one-time Anglican bishop of Durham, on the physical resurrection of Jesus is very relevant (*The Resurrection of the Son of God*, Augsburg Fortress, 2003). This is not the place here to attempt a successful "proof" of the miracles of Jesus Christ — especially his greatest miracle, his rising from the dead. I wish merely to point to the very importance of "proof" for modern empirically-minded man. Miracles are empirical, and reported as such. We of the modern era ought to immerse ourselves in the miracles of Jesus, by a repeated reading of them in the Gospels. How do we get over our assumption, our prejudice that such miracles are so

completely *unlikely* as to be incredible? We do this, I suggest, by contemplating the *Person* of Jesus as much as possible. By getting to know Christ as a living person, we shall come to see that it is *not at all unlikely* that he did what the Gospels say he did. That is apart from the powerful reasons provided by such scholars as the one I mentioned, N. T. Wright. Now, the fact is that Christ himself repeatedly appealed to his miracles, and we have an instance of this in our Gospel today: he threatens the unbelieving towns with hell for not having believed on the basis of the *miracles* he had worked in their midst (Matthew 11:20-24).

The long and the short of the matter is that we should strive to draw near the living Person of Jesus Christ. The Gospels are our best resource for this, placed in our hands by the Church whose books they are. Their Author is, ultimately, the Holy Spirit moving certain men to write of Jesus Christ, the Son of God our Redeemer. Christ spoke magnificent things and he did magnificent things. If we come to know him well we shall see that he knows all

things and he can do all things. He is our Lord and our God, and the Saviour of mankind. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him. Let us make him the object of our love and contemplation.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 11:20-24)

“Jesus began to reproach the towns ... because they did not repent.” At times we can find ourselves with an image of God Our Lord that is quite a caricature. I am thinking of the image of Jesus as always mild, kind and benevolent — even in the face of sin. Our Gospel passage today shows that this was far from so. He reproached with harsh and vivid language *“the towns in which most of his miracles had been worked, because they refused to repent.”* He roundly and plainly told them that they were on the way to hell: *“Capernaum, You shall be thrown down to hell.”* In his Anglican years, St. John

Henry Newman used to say of the religious Liberals he was opposing that what they lacked was a wholesome *fear* — a fear, that is, of *God*. They regarded God as simply “benevolent”, and from such a person they felt they had nothing to fear. Now, this can be said of much of the religious culture of our day as well. Not many fear God. In fact they are indifferent to him. Perhaps it derives from a lack of a sense of personal sin and of the seriousness of sin. I have no sin, so what have I to fear? Very many people secretly refuse to acknowledge personal sin and therefore the need to repent. Their conscience is dormant, and as we see from Our Lord’s words, the secret refusal to repent opens the door to the path down to hell.

Let us not lay ourselves open to Our Lord’s condemnation that we are refusing to repent. We need to develop a lively religious conscience — including a lively consciousness of sin.



Wednesday of the fifteenth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16):15 As for me, in justice I shall behold your face; I shall be filled with the vision of your glory.

Collect O God, who show the light of your truth to those who go astray, so that they may return to the right path, give all who for the faith they profess are accounted Christians the grace to reject whatever is contrary to the name of Christ and to strive after all that does it honour. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 10:5-7.13-16; Psalm 93;

Matthew 11:25-27

At that time Jesus said, I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. All

things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (Matthew 11:25-27)

Being certain One of the most serious philosophical problems of the past couple of centuries is that of certitude. The ordinary person regards himself as being certain of various things in life — such as the fact of the world, the fact of his own existence and life, his family and friends, the fact of moral obligation and of his own obligations, and the various things that make up his life and which are quite evident to him. Importantly, his religious faith may be an objective certainty to him. Still, the objector may reply, philosophically speaking how can you be really certain of anything? Your knowledge of anything comes down to your personal impressions, and could not these “personal impressions” be ultimately just *subjective* impressions having no guarantee of objective validity? Further, even if one grants that one’s perception of reality has objective validity, still, there is the question of your

having sufficient *proof* for the positions you hold. In any academic setting, if you make an assertion, or if you have an opinion, it is expected that you are able to *prove* it, and if you cannot, it is not regarded as reasonable that you continue to hold that opinion. What you take to be true must have commensurate reasons or premises to support your assertion. Is it ever possible, then, to get beyond *likelihood*? Is it possible to get beyond *probability*? In the specific matter of religious belief, if you say that you are absolutely certain that God exists and that Jesus Christ is God, on what basis can you have this certitude? After all, surely your so-called “reasons” can only take you to the point of high probability, at most. This line of thinking illustrates that a philosophical theory if allowed to run without a vigorous critique and exposure, can seriously undermine religious faith. It can plant doubt at the heart of the mind, and impede the faith that leads to hope in and love for God and Jesus Christ. A false philosophy can undermine belief in an objective religion. This is not the place to deal with epistemological scepticism. Suffice it

here to observe that it so flies in the face of common sense as to warn anyone away from it. Would a married couple, deeply in love with one another, need “proof” of their love for one another in order to justify their mutual certitude about it? Absolute certitude does not depend simply on logical demonstration, as the facts of life show.

I mention this question of religious certitude simply to introduce what our Lord says in our Gospel today. We can be certain of the high mysteries of our faith, those mysteries revealed by God, not because we can prove them for ourselves, but *because God has revealed them*. Now, the certitude possessed by the one who accepts this revelation is also a gift of grace. God aids, sustains and brings to fruition the effort of the humble and inquiring mind that seeks him. Grace is a decisive factor in religious knowledge. By his gift, God enables the disciple of Christ to be absolutely sure in his knowledge of the things of God. This is so not only for the highly educated and intelligent, but for the very ordinary, for the little ones. So it is that our Lord in today’s Gospel exults in his praise of his

heavenly Father for showing heavenly things to mere children. *“I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him”* (Matthew 11:25-27). As a matter of fact, not only is the knowledge of the Father and the Son possible with the aid of grace, but no-one will be able to reach the knowledge of the Father and of the Son without that grace. So it is that we have people of ordinary intellect and perhaps less than ordinary education having the greatest possible certitude about God and the revealed mysteries of Jesus Christ. Such people can be absolutely certain of the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, of the divine constitution of the Church which Christ founded, of the truth of the Church’s dogmatic teaching and of the truth of the propositions of the Christian Creed. There are many things

in ordinary life that the ordinary person can be and is certain of. So too, by the grace of God there are many mysteries of revealed religion that the ordinary baptized person can be and is certain of. Divine grace brings the blessing of religious certitude, and this certitude of faith is the foundation of sanctity.

Let those who have the blessing of faith, rejoice in the goodness of God in bestowing this blessing. Such persons will be conscious of their religious certitude, even though they may not be able formally to *prove* what they know to be the fact. They have received as God's gift that faith of which they are conscious. It enables them, indeed it inclines them, to trust totally in God who reveals his word. This enables them to be personally certain, and certain with genuine ease. They know without the plague of scepticism and doubt. On this basis they are able joyfully to seek union with God and to forgo all things because of what they know to be true.

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Second reflection:

God of holiness and life

Consider the manifestation of God to Moses in the burning bush near the mountain of Horeb — Moses' first encounter with the God of Israel. What does God reveal of himself? What does he show he is like? Firstly, he reveals that he is *holy* and utterly *other* than sinful man. "*Come no nearer,*" he instructed Moses. "*Take off your shoes, for the place on which you stand is holy ground.*" This is a fundamental feature of the God of Abraham: he is *holy*. Throughout the history of Revealed Religion, it is *holiness* that God will impress upon his chosen people, and the requirements of holiness in all their relationships with him. "*Be holy,*" he would say, "*for I am holy*" — and St Peter reminds us of it (1 Peter 1:16). But there is more. He introduces himself as "*the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.*" In his dispute with the Sadducees over the resurrection of the dead, Our Lord said that these words of God to Moses prove that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are still alive. So God reveals himself to Moses as the God of the

living, the God of life. Moreover, he has *compassion* for those who suffer — so he wishes them to have an abundant life. Therefore he sends Moses “*to Pharaoh to bring the sons of Israel, my people, out of Egypt.*”

Our Lord would say to all that he had come to give life, life in abundance. God wants us to live now with a share in his life, and to live forever the life of God in heaven. Let us appreciate that the only path to this life in abundance is the holiness that God wants of us.



Thursday of the fifteenth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16):15 As for me, in justice I shall behold your face; I shall be filled with the vision of your glory.

Collect O God, who show the light of your truth to those who go astray, so that they may return to the right path, give all who for the faith they profess are accounted Christians the grace to reject whatever is contrary to the name of Christ and to strive after all that does it honour. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 26:7-9.12.16-19; Psalm 101;

Matthew 11: 28-30

Jesus said, Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart,

and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-30)

Rest and joy It is impossible to sum up the spirit of religion in the history of mankind, of course, because the religions of man display such vast differences. One could argue, though, that while religion is the undying tendency of man and society, it is nevertheless generally experienced as a burden. That is to say, the gods tend to threaten, and one had better keep them placated. Diseases and other misfortunes are signs of their irritation and anger. There is a graphic portrayal in Cardinal Newman's novel, *Callista*, of the response of the populace to the great locust plague which swept all before it. The plague was due to the Christian neglect of the *gods* — and this popular interpretation ultimately led to Callista's martyrdom. The setting of that novel was the time of St Cyprian of Carthage — indeed he is a major character of the story. A century and a half later, at the time of St Augustine when the Vandals captured Rome (410 AD) and their hordes were threatening the Roman civilization, a popular pagan charge

was that the neglect of the *gods* in favour of the Christian system had put the Empire in mortal danger. The gods were forsaking the Empire, and the Christian deity was helpless in the face of the threat. This perception was a major factor in Augustine's writing his great work, *The City of God*. One of the points he made was that the old gods failed in the *past* and they were *never* held in high regard anyway. This, I suspect, is true of most of the religions of man — I doubt that the gods of the religions uninfluenced by Revelation have been held in high regard. Yet religion was always seen as an anxious necessity. It is required, but it is not commonly a joy. When we turn to the revealed religion of the Hebrews at least as it is presented in the Gospels, we notice two things. Firstly, there are examples of genuine religion involving *joy* — and this is a notable feature of revealed religion at its best. We think of Mary, the mother of Jesus. We think of Elizabeth and Zechariah. We think of Simeon and Anna in the Temple. At the same time, Christ condemns the scribes and Pharisees for the burden that they made of religion for

the ordinary person. They burdened them with their prescriptions and gave them no relief. One of the many things Jesus of Nazareth brought to man was the notion that God is man's joy and happiness, and the worship and service of him is rest for his soul. This is not to say that Revealed Religion before Christ did not teach this — on the contrary. We read in the Book of Sirach the invitation to seek "wisdom," which of course is to be found in the God of the chosen people. "*Put your neck under her yoke,*" Sirach tells us. "*With all your soul draw close to her... Thus you will find rest in her, and she will become your joy*" (Sirach 6:25-29). Or again, in the same inspired Book, "wisdom" appeals to the "untutored" to "*come aside to me ... and take up abode ... Submit to her yoke ... for she is close to those who seek her*" (Sirach 51:23-26). All of this is fulfilled in Jesus Christ — in his very Person. He is the wisdom of God that brings rest and joy. And so it is that we read our Lord's consoling words, directed not only to his disciples but to the ages: "*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my*

yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30). Where is the “wisdom” spoken of in the Book of Sirach, the “wisdom” that beckons to all that they come and seek her? It is found in the person of Jesus and in submitting to his yoke. For those who come to Christ, gentleness and humility will be encountered in him. There will not be the harshness and burdensomeness of the scribes and Pharisees, but peace and joy. But of course, if this is to be found, the condition (of learning from Christ and accepting his “yoke”) must be embraced. The yoke of Jesus Christ must be actively received, and he must be looked to as one’s Master. *Learn from me*, he says. *Take my yoke upon you*, he insists. If we do this, rest will come — and we have the experience and testimony of the saints to guarantee this. Christ himself had the deepest joy amid the greatest of burdens. The greater the Cross accepted in the spirit of Christ, the greater the joy. Our Lord guaranteed that the one who leaves houses, family and all

for him and for the Gospel will receive a hundred times this in the present life, with eternal happiness in the next.

One of the most widespread problems in modern society is gambling — that is, making wagers. The wager is made in the hope of gaining a windfall of money. There is, however, one wager which is to be made by all, and if it is made it will bring the greatest of windfalls in the fullness of time. The wager is to stake all on Jesus Christ. Let us approach him, let us learn from him, let us take up his yoke, and we can be *sure* of finding rest for our souls. In fact, Jesus Christ is the only true rest for which our souls were made. *Peace I leave you*, Christ said, *my own peace I give to you*. Let us accept his word, knowing that in him is found eternal life.

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Second reflection:

God-with-us Moses' first meeting with God at the burning bush of Horeb was a foundational event in the history of the chosen people. Just as God revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and in so doing revealed something of what he was like, so too — and perhaps even more so — he revealed himself to Moses. Moses asked a striking question of God and received a most revealing answer. *“But if they ask me what his name is, what am I to tell them? And God said to Moses, ‘I Am who I Am.’”* God revealed himself as the One who *exists*. He *simply* exists, without anything to qualify or limit his fullness of being. Of nothing else could this be said, that it *simply is* — if only because all else has at least a beginning and in some sense changes over time. God is, was, and always will be God, and this was what Moses and the chosen people could always count on. He can never pass away or change from being as he is, which is simply *to be*, without any limitation. Moreover, in sending Moses and in revealing his compassion for his suffering people, God reveals that

he is one who is always present to his people to save. *I am*, and *as I am*, *I shall be there with you*. On me you can rely. He is this present and saving God, this God of compassion, who always is. He is God with them, and he is always this.

Let us place our entire faith in the God who revealed himself to Moses, but finally and fully in his Son, Jesus Christ, who is Emmanuel, *God-with-us*.



Friday of the fifteenth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16):15 As for me, in justice I shall behold your face; I shall be filled with the vision of your glory.

Collect O God, who show the light of your truth to those who go astray, so that they may return to the right path, give all who for the faith they profess are accounted Christians the grace to reject whatever is contrary to the name of Christ and to strive after all that does it honour. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 38:1-6.21-22.7-8; Isaiah 38:1-6.21-22; Matthew 12:1-8

At that time Jesus went through the cornfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some ears of corn and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, Look! Your disciples are doing what

is unlawful on the Sabbath. He answered, Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread- which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. Or haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent? I tell you that one greater than the temple is here. If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. (Matthew 12:1-8)

Lord of the Sabbath One of the truly distinguishing features of Jewish religion in the classical era was the Sabbath. Religious festivals and celebrations were a normal feature of religion, as they are of any era. But the Jewish *Sabbath*, the seventh day of rest and worship, enshrined in the third of the Ten Commandments, was virtually distinctive to Judaism. By the time of our Lord, it had had a long and varied history spanning at least a millennium, if not longer. It was one of the achievements

of the Pharisee class that the Sabbath had attained such a central position in the practical life of the nation. But of course, what the Pharisees insisted on with such firmness was an *interpretation* of the divine law on the Sabbath. It was an interpretation among other interpretations, distinguished for its strictness, and by and large the Pharisaical interpretation had gained the ascendancy. In our Gospel scene today, our Lord is walking through the cornfields on the Sabbath. Perhaps it was after the Synagogue service, and perhaps our Lord had been speaking at it — it is clear from the Gospels that it was our Lord's practice during his public ministry to speak in the Synagogue on the Sabbath. If so, he was walking through the cornfields, with his disciples in his company. They were hungry after the morning's proceedings. They began to pick ears of corn to assuage their hunger — and some Pharisees who were in the immediate area observed this. It was forbidden to “work” in the fields on the Sabbath — and picking ears of corn was a variant of harvesting. So the disciples of Jesus were in breach of the Sabbath rest —

and this was a serious infringement not only of one's personal religious life, but of the religious life of the nation. To allow it to pass was serious for society. We need not presume that the Pharisees in question were in bad faith. They may have been lower-order Pharisees, reflecting their education, their personal practice, and the religious mind-set of their class. They approached our Lord to object to what he was permitting his disciples to do. With that, our Lord immediately reminded them of a Scriptural precedent for a humane and broader interpretation of religious law, as shown in the practice of David. He gave them an instance from current practice too.

Of course, it all came down to *interpretation*. The said Pharisees had *interpreted* the Law of Moses on the practice of the Sabbath in the light of their ruling assumptions. Our Lord concluded his rejection of their strictures with the words of God in the prophet Hosea: "*For it is love that I desire, not sacrifice, and knowledge of God rather than holocausts*" (Hosea 6:6). Their *starting point* ought to have been that God is a God of mercy, love

and compassion. The Book of the prophet Hosea is one of the most beautiful and influential in the Scriptures. It denounces the priests and the leaders, and speaks of God as Israel's Lover and Spouse. The very chapter of Hosea from which our Lord's quotation comes (though, of course, there were at first no "chapters" as such), describes the forgiving love of God for his weak and wayward people. God *"has struck us, but he will bind our wounds. He will revive us after two days; on the third day he will raise us up, to live in his presence"* (6:1-2) — suggesting a resurrection on the third day which God will effect. The overriding aim should be to know the Lord, for *"as certain as the dawn is his coming... he will come to us like the rain, like spring rain that waters the earth"* (6:3). These Pharisees emphatically did not know the Lord, and they acted on a conception of him that was contrary to the vision of Hosea. Strive to know, our Lord insists with them, the meaning of God's words in the prophet's Book — *"It is love, mercy, that I desire, not sacrifice, and knowledge of God rather than holocausts."* They were not

conveying the knowledge of a God of compassion, mercy and love. All of this reminds us of how religion so often turns on *interpretation*. Christ appeared on the scene of God's chosen people, presenting himself as the *definitive* interpretation of the Scriptures. He is their *true* interpretation and their fulfilment. He delivers to us their proper meaning, and they light up the fullness of what he teaches. Everything pivots around the person of Jesus Christ, far greater than what the Scriptures had formally expected, though all that they did expect found fulfilment only in him. This was rejected by the highest echelons of the nation.

Let us contemplate the clash that occurs in our Gospel scene of today. It ends with the singular notion that Jesus Christ is Lord — Lord, in this context, of the Sabbath. *He* is the Sabbath's true and final interpretation, and the Sabbath points to him. The "*Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath*" (Matthew 12:1-8). What the chosen people of God brought to the world was Jesus Christ, to whom has been given all authority in heaven and on earth. All the

nations are called to be his disciples — and he can be located. We know where he is. He can be accessed easily. He resides mystically and sacramentally in his body the Church, built on the Rock that is Simon Peter. Let us go to him then, and be with him always!

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Second reflection:

Christ is Scripture's fulfilment In the book of Exodus, we read how God institutes the Jewish feast of the Passover. It commemorated the Lord passing over the houses of the Israelites to strike the land of Egypt. Thus the Israelites escaped the destroying plague which was visited upon the Egyptians. They were to eat the Passover meal in commemoration of this deliverance, which pointed to their passing out of slavery and entry into the freedom of the promised land which was soon to come. The Passover meal in the fullness of time was transformed. Referring to himself in our Gospel passage of today (Matthew 12:1-8), Our Lord says that *“here is something greater than the*

Temple". So too with the Passover — his was the new and greater Passover. The new Passover meal was, in the plan of God, the memorial of the new and definitive deliverance from the slavery of sin, and the passing over to a new life, life in Christ. This was effected in the death and resurrection of Christ, the new paschal lamb. This is commemorated and re-presented in the Mass, instituted by Christ the night before he died as he celebrated his last Passover meal with his disciples. The Mass is not only the *memorial* of the passing over at Calvary of mankind (in Christ) from sin, but mysteriously and by the power of God it always *makes Christ's Passover present*. The Mass is the *making present of the sacrifice of Christ at Calvary*, and in Holy Communion we enter into personal communion with Christ in his great sacrifice on our behalf. Let us make Mass the greatest moment of every week, and even, if possible, the greatest moment of every day. Let us fill our daily life with spiritual communions, uniting all parts of our day continually with the Eucharistic Jesus.



Saturday of the fifteenth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16):15 As for me, in justice I shall behold your face; I shall be filled with the vision of your glory.

Collect O God, who show the light of your truth to those who go astray, so that they may return to the right path, give all who for the faith they profess are accounted Christians the grace to reject whatever is contrary to the name of Christ and to strive after all that does it honour. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Micah 2:1-5; Psalm 9; Matthew 12:14-21

The Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus. Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place. Many followed him, and he healed all their sick, warning them not to tell who he was. This was to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: Here is my servant

whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope. (Matthew 12:14-21)

Hope of the nations The Gospel passage today opens with a formal mention of the response of the Pharisees to Christ. Let us step back a little. Following Matthew's presentation of the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5 to 7) there is a brief notice of the comparison made by the people between Jesus and "the scribes" — Jesus taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes (7:29). In the following chapter "*a certain scribe came*" and declared his intention to follow Jesus "*wherever you go*" (8:19). In the next chapter "*certain of the scribes,*" on seeing Jesus forgive the sins of the paralytic, think that "*this man is blaspheming*" (9:3). In the same chapter, "*the Pharisees*" approach Christ's disciples and complain at his

eating with publicans and sinners — which drew an immediate response from our Lord, directing their attention to the teaching of the prophet Hosea on God and his will (9: 11-13). Again, in the same chapter, the Pharisees accuse our Lord of casting out demons by means of an alliance with Satan — and our Lord refers to this accusation in the next chapter in his directions to the Twelve (10:25). In the twelfth chapter, the Pharisees go directly to our Lord and tell him that, in their plucking ears of corn on the Sabbath, his disciples are doing what is not lawful (12:2). But our Lord, by citing the Scriptures, shows them that they have completely missed the *spirit* of the divine Law. He also made, in passing, what must have seemed a most striking claim: “*The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath*” (12:8). No-one had ever said this before. The temperature, as we might say, is rising, but there is no ringing denunciation of the Pharisees by our Lord as yet. At that, St Matthew tells us that our Lord entered the synagogue and there before them was a man whose hand was withered. We read that “they” — obviously the

Pharisees again — questioned him whether it was lawful to heal. They wished to have something definite with which to accuse and condemn him. Having appealed to common sense, Christ then cured the man. In St Matthew's account, the Pharisees perceived Jesus to be a major threat to all that they stood for, and in particular to their authority in respect to the observance of the Sabbath. He was a great religious force that had suddenly arisen, manifesting unparalleled authority as a teacher.

In the Gospel of St Matthew, this incident was a turning point in that the Pharisees “*went out, took counsel against him so as to destroy him*” (12:14). Their rejection of Jesus Christ was total — of course, we must not assume that this included all of the Pharisees. We know from the Gospel of St John that Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and in his conversation with Christ he said that “we” know that you are a teacher who comes from God (John 3:2). So, others beside himself recognized this. However, here we have in our passage from St Matthew (12: 14 21) a firm statement of the iron determination of a very influential

element in the nation to eliminate Jesus Christ. He was to be destroyed. There are more references to the opposition of the Pharisees following this notice — such as in 12:24, when they repeat their accusation of a league between Satan and Jesus, and when certain of the Pharisees demanded a sign from Jesus (12:38). Now — and this introduces our main point here — what was our Lord's response to this unyielding hostility? He did not pummel them with his unanswerable arguments, nor overwhelm them with his miracles, nor rout them by increasing his sway over the people. He did not meet force with greater force, nor did he act in kind — with the kind of action they were taking towards him. He responded with *humility*, and, we might say, with *meekness*. *“Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place. Many followed him, and he healed all their sick, warning them not to tell who he was.”* His whole style in the face of injustice and persecution, St Matthew tells us, was a fulfilment of what the prophet had predicted of the One who was coming. *“This was to fulfil what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: Here is my*

servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope” (Matthew 12: 14-21). The “servant” (*pais*) is the chosen Servant of Isaiah, the Messiah, who would save the nations by his meekness and his obedient suffering.

Let us contemplate Christ’s mounting sufferings, and the obedient submission with which he endured them. The Passion is in sight, and he summons his disciples to come after him. The road to glory is marked by the Cross, and we who count ourselves as his disciples must understand the plan of God. It is manifested in the Person and life of Jesus Christ, who saved the nations by means of his sufferings. In him the nations put their hope because he is the Saviour of the world. Let us recognize the absolute

uniqueness of Jesus Christ, God, Man and our Redeemer
— in his name the nations will put their hope.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 12:14-21)

“The Pharisees went out and began to plot against Jesus”

In our Gospel passage today we are told that *“The Pharisees went out and began to plot against Jesus, discussing how to destroy him.”* A great persecution of our Lord was beginning, and it would culminate in his saving death on the cross. Our Lord, we are told, *“knew this, and withdrew from the district.”* He did not react in frustration and anger, but in meekness and in doing good. One detail is left unsaid by the evangelists, but it is something we may safely presume. We cannot adequately imagine the bond between Our Lord and his holy mother, the two holiest persons in the history of the world. They would have had various contacts during his public ministry and as the storm

clouds were gathering. But Our Lord must have found very great solace and support in his mother's holy faith and understanding. The thought of her must have accompanied him everywhere, right to his death.

Let us imitate Mary in being a source of consolation to Jesus. St Paul speaks of us making the Holy Spirit sad by our sins. In some sense Christ must still suffer at the sight of so much infidelity and ingratitude. We ought strive to make up for our own sins and those of others, and by our fidelity bring joy and consolation to the heart of Christ.



Sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 54 (53):6, 8 See, I have God for my help. The Lord sustains my soul. I will sacrifice to you with willing heart, and praise your name, O Lord, for it is good.

Collect Show favour, O Lord, to your servants and mercifully increase the gifts of your grace, that, made fervent in hope, faith and charity, they may be ever watchful in keeping your commands. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Wisdom 12:13.16-19; Psalm 85;

Romans 8:26-27; Matthew 13:24-43

Jesus told them another parable: The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed ears, then the weeds also appeared.

The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?' 'An enemy did this,' he replied. The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' 'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.' He told them another parable: The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches. He told them still another parable: The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough. Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through

the prophet: I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world. Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field. He answered, The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear. (Matthew 13:24-43)

Faith In our parable today, “*the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom*” — and they are those who accept Christ’s word in faith. One of the signs of a good

education, as opposed to, let us say, just acquiring a lot of information, is that a person does not take things simply on faith. As the years of schooling proceed, the pupil is increasingly expected to provide reasons for his or her statements. A good essay in English Literature, or History, or Economics will argue a thesis, and provide persuasive reasons. Apart from formal studies, it is expected that while a child and youth will have placed his faith in the word of his parents, as he grows up he will not simply rely on them, but will himself see the reasons for his positions and act on the basis of personal conviction. The child necessarily acts on a natural faith because he lacks experience and a formed mind. But all expect that in due course reason will come into its own in his life. Sometimes, though — and more often than we perhaps imagine — the notion of “faith” in something or someone is silently despised — especially in respect to *religion*. A culture which places a high store on scientific proof, on rational justification, on a healthy scepticism as to the views of “authorities,” can look askance at religion which,

on the contrary, places considerable emphasis on *faith*. Religion, being concerned in the main with things which cannot be seen or empirically tested, and which depends normally on the word of the one who has “seen” the matter in question. It recognizes the authority of the one whose word is accepted as authoritative. It is accepted, or presumed, or known, that the person on whom we rely has “seen” (in some sense) what we have not seen. His word on the matter is, then, dependable. Now, it ought be plain that in itself this is a reasonable principle, even if in particular cases (of, say, superstition and excessive credulity) it is not reasonable. Even in academic matters we accept a certain level of faith in the high authority of a particular author in some field. Aquinas is a renowned authority in matters philosophical and theological — and to quote him on a point as an authority on how things stand, is taken to be reasonable. The same is the case with Aristotle in, say, *Metaphysics* — and other authorities could be cited in their respective fields. This presence of faith in ordinary

life ought open us to the reasonableness of faith in things of religion.

Many religions have developed from some great soul's quest for the Ultimate. Because of his quest, that person is considered to have attained certain outstanding perceptions that have then become the guide for millions of others (such as Buddha, Confucius, Mahomet). In such cases, it is thought reasonable to have "faith." It is faith in the word of another whose authority is deemed to be vindicated by his religious achievement. It is faith in a person judged to have possessed exceptional religious insights, not unlike the faith we exercise in other authorities of ordinary life. But where it is a question of a *revealed* religion, involving the acceptance of *mysteries* the knowledge of which could never have been attained by anyone, we are speaking of a faith that is absolutely fundamental. Our acceptance of those mysteries depends totally on faith in the word of the One who has made them known and declared them to be true. It is only by faith in him that we can know those mysteries. In the previous

case, that of a religion which is simply the teaching and insights of a great religious leader — well, theoretically his disciples could come to see *for themselves* the truth (or otherwise) of his teaching. They can, by dint of following his path, eventually see what he, their teacher and leader, saw. They can judge its truth for themselves. His teaching is not beyond the mind and religious reason of man. But this is not so for a religion that is revealed by God and which involves realities beyond the capacity of the human mind to attain. In this case, the foundation is simply and entirely faith, faith in the word of the One who has revealed it. That person is, of course, Jesus Christ. He was preceded by the patriarchs and prophets of the chosen people, but their crown and fulfilment was Christ and his divine revelation. In this case, faith is imperative. It is the foundation of living the religion.

Faith is the foundation of the life of Christians — “sons of the kingdom” — and their faith is in the word of Christ, recognized as the Son of God made man. This faith is not of the order of human faith, for it would be beyond

the natural capacity of man to place in Christ the total, unreserved faith in him and in absolutely everything he has revealed. This faith is God's gift. It is the seed of today's parable (Matthew 13: 24-43), available to the well-disposed and especially those who pray for it. By means of this divine faith we are disposed by grace to place our faith in Christ, accepting all that he has revealed. This is the basis of holiness, of eternal life possessed now in its beginnings, and in its fullness hereafter.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.163-165. (Faith as the beginning of eternal life)

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Second reflection: (Matthew 13:24-43)

“The harvest is the end of the world; the reapers are the angels.” There is no getting around it: things will inevitably come to an end and then there will be the judgment of God. Our Lord tells his parable of the sower who sows good seed in his field (Matthew 13: 24-43). The

weeds appear with the wheat and in God's plan, these weeds are allowed to remain. But life is short and eternity long, as Blessed John Henry Newman writes at the end of one of his books (*The Development of Christian Doctrine*). In our daily life we ought live in view of this reality. We are transient and our true eternal life will depend on the judgment that is coming. Let us use the gift of time well by using our freedom well. We have been given time and the capacity to choose. Time passes on. The present moment is with us and then gone forever, with the choices we made during that moment that has now gone. Consequences flow from choices, though, and they affect the present and the future.

Let us then give everything to God by giving to him our time and our choices in fulfilling well the work he has entrusted to us during the passing moment we now have. Life is short, eternity long. Eternity is near, and with it the harvest. What will our harvest be?



Monday of the sixteenth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 54 (53):6, 8 See, I have God for my help. The Lord sustains my soul. I will sacrifice to you with willing heart, and praise your name, O Lord, for it is good.

Collect Show favour, O Lord, to your servants and mercifully increase the gifts of your grace, that, made fervent in hope, faith and charity, they may be ever watchful in keeping your commands. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Micah 6:1-4.6-8; Psalm 49;
Matthew 12:38-42

Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to Jesus, Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you. He answered, A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah

was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here.
(Matthew 12:38-42)

Christ the fulfilment The study of Ancient History is fascinating and is the subject of unending interpretation. There are great bodies of texts available, and I remember when I was studying Ancient History at secondary school level, this discipline amounted to a study of classical Greece and Rome. I remember being intrigued at the time by the absence of any study of Ancient Israel, especially in view of its powerful influence on the religions of the world — and in particular on the religious life of the West. The school curriculum embodied an interpretation

of what was important in the origins of Western civilization. I mention this merely to introduce the matter of *interpretation*. For any student of Ancient History, the texts of *Israel* should have a certain pride of place. Of course, for those who adhere to revealed religion, the inspired texts of the Hebrew Bible, what they would call the Old Testament, have supreme pride of place after the texts of the New Testament. Let this point introduce the matter of how the Christian looks upon what he calls the Old Testament — which is to say the inspired writings prior to Jesus Christ. The Christian looks upon them as Christ looks upon them. Jesus Christ was a Hebrew. He was raised in those inspired writings. He loved and treasured them, and used them in his preaching and instructions. He referred his disciples to them. So what was his relationship to them? How did he see himself in relation to them — because this is what the Christian will, or should, think about them too. St Paul writes, *let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*. Now, our Lord said that he came to *fulfil* the Scriptures, and certainly not

to destroy them. What is read in the Old Testament is brought to its *fulfilment* in him. That is to say, they revealed and expressed the word and will of God truly, but to a point. More was to come, and it came in the person and teaching of Jesus Christ. He himself brought all that had been revealed at that stage to its completion and fulfilment. Of course, to see how this is so in a comprehensive manner requires a lot prayerful thought. On rising from the dead, we read in the Gospel of St Luke that our Lord took two of his disciples through the Scriptures, showing how they spoke of him.

Our Gospel passage today gives us one instance of how the Sacred Scriptures prior to Jesus Christ find their fulfilment in him, and how he illustrated this fact. We read that “*some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to Jesus, Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you.*” It was far from a sincere request. Its purpose was to subject Jesus Christ to themselves, and certainly not to subject themselves to God through him. Our Lord rejected the specific request that they were demanding — just a

showy display of power — but instead pointed to his very self. He did it by setting himself against the backdrop of the Scriptures, presenting himself as the fulfilment of what they offered and narrated. He pointed to the figure and ministry of *Jonah* the prophet — and, incidentally, this use by Christ of the Book of Jonah gives to *it* a special aura. The Book of Jonah has, I think, been somewhat trivialized in the minds of many, but let us ever remember that it was here used in a very serious and specific fashion by Christ. Our Lord did not trivialize the Book of Jonah, so we ought not. Many important lessons, coming from God the Author of it, are expressed in it. In particular, our Lord says to his enemies that he is to be regarded as another and greater Jonah. Specifically, he highlights Jonah's being thrown into the sea and devoured by the "great fish". He was thrown to what was intended to be his death, and this to save many others. So too, our Lord intimates, will he be put to death for the salvation of the many. Jonah came forth to bring repentance, forgiveness and salvation to the pagans (of Nineveh). So will Jesus Christ, but in a much

greater manner than he. There is someone greater than Jonah here. Our Lord is the fulfilment of what happened to Jonah and of what he did. Our Lord points to another figure — and there is something greater here than that figure. The queen of the South came to visit Solomon to hear his wisdom, but Solomon as a wise man was as nothing compared to Jesus Christ. The wisdom of Solomon finds its fulfilment, its completion in Jesus Christ and in his teaching. Just as the queen of the South came to hear Solomon, how much more should all listen to Jesus Christ. He is the divine Wisdom, God incarnate.

Let us observe how often in the Gospels our Lord refers to the Sacred Scriptures, and how he uses them. He was especially concerned to show that what God revealed in the Scriptures prior to him was a pointer to what was to come in him. He is the fulfilment of what God had revealed. He is God's final word, but a word to be interpreted with the help of what God had said prior to him. Importantly, what God had said in the Scriptures was itself to be interpreted in the light of Christ's Person and

teaching. The whole of the Scriptures, Old and New Testament — especially the Gospels — are the word of God. By means of them we come to know what God wants of us and for us, and thus we know the way to heaven with him.



Second reflection:

Sin In our Gospel today, our Lord refers to a “*wicked and adulterous generation.*” They were in sin. In the Book of Exodus we read how the Pharaoh “*and his courtiers changed their minds about the people*” of Israel (14:5). They “*gave chase to the sons of Israel as they made their triumphant escape*” from the land of Egypt (14:9). Observe, though, the following detail: “*The Lord made Pharaoh, king of Egypt, stubborn*” (14:8). What does this mean, and what are its implications? Obviously the all-holy God cannot be understood as having directly caused the king to sin — to be sinfully stubborn in relation to what God had told him through the mouth of Moses. Rather,

inasmuch as God continually sustains by his creative act all that exists, he sustained (“made”) the heart of Pharaoh in his, the Pharaoh’s, own freely chosen stubbornness. God permitted it, by creatively sustaining it. In his exercise of personal freedom, a freedom given to him and continually sustained by the Creator, the Pharaoh (as it were) dragged the all-holy God into sustaining him in his sin. It is part of the mystery of the gift of freedom. No wonder the punishment was great.

As we read this and reflect on its implications, let us advert to the fact this happens every time one of us sins. How great the offence to God is the sin of the world, and how great the need of a Redeemer — not only to save the world, but for the glory of God, so outraged by sin! God sustains his creatures while they freely sin and he as Creator is thus placed countless times into a form of proximity with sin. Great must be the horror and sadness of God. St Paul exhorts us not to make the Holy Spirit sad. No wonder sin is punished. Let us resolve never to offend God our Creator and Redeemer by deliberate sin. And

when we do sin, let us profoundly repent and begin again,
knowing God to be all merciful. So then, Now I begin!



Tuesday of the sixteenth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 54 (53):6, 8 See, I have God for my help. The Lord sustains my soul. I will sacrifice to you with willing heart, and praise your name, O Lord, for it is good.

Collect Show favour, O Lord, to your servants and mercifully increase the gifts of your grace, that, made fervent in hope, faith and charity, they may be ever watchful in keeping your commands. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Micah 7:14-15.18-20; Psalm 84;

Matthew 12:46-50

While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you. He replied to him, Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? Pointing to his

disciples, he said, Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother. (Matthew 12:46-50)

Obedience

Consider our Gospel scene today. Our Lord, we might say, is the religious celebrity of the populace — though incurring the increasingly implacable hostility of the religious leaders. He himself knows the ephemeral character of popular acclaim. In his case, people saw the manifest authority with which he taught, the extraordinary miraculous powers he exercised with such ease, the power over the netherworld he manifested, and his control even over nature. He could subdue storms at sea at a word, feed vast crowds with practically nothing, change water into wine at will, and heal all kinds of illness. We repeatedly read that “*multitudes*” — “*great multitudes*” — followed him, that “*great multitudes*” gathered to hear him, that “*Herod the tetrarch heard of the fame of Jesus,*” and that “*scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem came*” to him. At the time of his public ministry, clearly there was no-one in Galilee, Samaria or Judea who could compare

with him in his dominance of the general scene. St Matthew speaks of Christ fulfilling the prophecy, “*Land of Zabulon, land of Nephthalim, ... the people that sat in darkness has seen a great light*” (Matthew 4:15-16). Though news travelled slowly because of the lack of communications, nevertheless within a short time news about him was passing beyond the boundaries of the nation. St Matthew writes that “*his fame went throughout all Syria*” and great multitudes followed him, including from “*beyond Jordan*” (4:24-25). He was known and followed from the Decapolis region. When Christ went incognito to the region of Tyre and Sidon for some quiet time with his disciples, he was quickly discovered and pursued by the Canaanite woman, pleading that he heal her daughter of her demon-possession. Once our Lord “went public,” his name became quickly known, not only throughout the land of the chosen people, but beyond. That is to say, our Lord’s international status (as we might put it) began not only after his death, resurrection and ascension, but even during his short public life. So this

was the Person of our Gospel scene today. This acclaimed figure was speaking to the people when his mother and his relatives were discovered to be outside awaiting him. The message came: they wanted to see him.

I like to ponder on what this message from them *implies*. Jesus was a celebrity, as we might put it nowadays, yet his relatives had no hesitation in arriving on the scene and asking that he pause in what he was doing, and come on out, or through the crowds, to speak to them. It implies that they had little doubt that he would do this. This itself implies that he had done just this, and many other things like it, during all those years of obscure living in Nazareth. We read in the Gospel of St Luke that after Mary and Joseph's finding of the child Jesus in the Temple, he returned to Nazareth with them and *was subject to their authority*. He was quietly obedient to them, and subject to the exigencies of ordinary life, including the various demands and perceptions of his clan and circle of relatives, friends, acquaintances, and village life generally. This request, so unhesitatingly sent to Jesus through the

crowds, provides us with yet another glimpse into the fundamental place of *obedience* in the life of Jesus Christ. He emphatically possessed a profound spirit of obedience. He entered the world to do the will of his heavenly Father, and this divine will was manifested in various ways in ordinary everyday life. It reminds us that a fully human life, a life of the best and most sterling human quality, entails at a basic level the spirit of obedience. What this can mean in practice may not be, though, a simple black-and-white matter. Christ recognized the authority of the scribes and Pharisees. At one point (Matthew 23:2) he told the crowds that they occupied the chair of Moses — but he condemned them and resisted their influence in various respects (23: 4-35). So, we ought not adopt a simplistic notion of obedience. It is, though, fundamental in a truly human and religious life. The broad lines of it are clear: legitimate authority must be recognized. The example of Jesus Christ must be before us always. In our Gospel today, our Lord takes the occasion to stress how important to him is this spirit of obedience to God in the

living of our life: “*Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? Pointing to his disciples, he said, Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother*” (Matthew 12:46-50).

Let us also notice a detail in this scene. While Jesus was speaking “*to the crowd*” (*tois ochlois*) the message came to him. In his response, he stretches forth his hand “*toward his disciples*” (*tous mathētas*). It is not the crowd to whom our Lord points as doing the will of his Father in heaven, but to his *disciples*. If we are to be disciples of Jesus Christ we must have the holy ambition of being obedient to the will of God, and this spirit of obedience will be present in our everyday life, for it is there that the will of God is present and awaiting us. Obedience to God’s will is central to Christian discipleship.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 12:46-50)

**“Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven,
he is my brother and sister”**

In our day, a day of terrorism and conflict of various kinds, one of the greatest needs is to search for some basis of real and general brotherhood. At various points in the Gospels Our Lord mentions various ways in which we are all brothers. For instance, our Lord makes it clear that he identifies with the least of his brothers in need, and regards anything done to them as having been done to him (Matthew 25). We are brothers of the least, because the least are brothers of Christ. But now, consider Our Lord’s words today (Matthew 12:46-50). Our Lord says that *“Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven, he is my brother and sister and mother.”* There are many good people — in both the Church and outside of it — who seemingly try to do the will of God. They try to *be* good and to *do* good. Wherever there is such a person, Our Lord has told us that in him there is one whom he regards as his brother or sister or mother. Let us look at good people in that light. So let

us respect such persons who try to be good, doing what God wants. Without perhaps knowing it, they are close to Christ in a way known to God.

We ought be quick to notice the goodness in people, their goodwill, their good intentions, their acting according to their best lights, whoever they may be. Let us always remember our Lord's words about them and strive to include them among those we regard as our brothers in God.



Wednesday of the sixteenth week in Ordinary Time

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Collect Show favour, O Lord, to your servants and mercifully increase the gifts of your grace, that, made fervent in hope, faith and charity, they may be ever watchful in keeping your commands. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 1:1.4-10; Psalm 70;

Matthew 13:1-9

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered round him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables, saying: A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was

scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop — a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear. (Matthew 13:1-9)

The ways of God Nature films are a source of unending interest, and seem always to be popular. One fascinating feature of animals is their “character.” By that I mean that close attention to this or that animal will show its “character,” its way of acting, its characteristic response to what is before it — and its character can be very different from that of another animal of the same species and of the same family. Character, and characteristic *action*, is a feature which we commonly attribute to things that possess *awareness* — and in an analogous sense, to all living

things. We could also speak of the *characteristic* action of non-living things, such as the weather, or whatever. We might say that when a tsunami destroys a coastal town, it is acting “in character” — in a way that we would have expected. *Character* is most evident among human beings, and is particularly plain within any large family where there are great differences in character. It is by virtue of his “character” that the person acts in certain ways. His ways of acting are “characteristic” of him. For instance, it might be that he reacts angrily to any slight, and hence people take care not to slight him. They know his *character*, and this particular way he usually acts. Again, it might be that he gives generously to the poor, and so people who are in need come to him. They are aware of this feature of his character. Were he not to give to the poor on some occasion, they would be surprised, and might think that he is not acting in character. Again, some things that are said of people are not believed because such things are thought to be so much out of character for them that they are not credible. Nothing of this is surprising because

everything has a definite nature or structure to its existence. It does not just exist, but it exists as some definite thing which defines the shape, the form and the manner of its existence. It is something with a definite character, and it acts in ways characteristic of it. Let us take this question to a higher level and ask, what of the Author of all things? Does he act in certain ways, ways that might be said to be somehow characteristic of him? Is there a pattern to the ways of God? Yes indeed!

Precisely as the Creator of all things, God's character is revealed in his creation. Consider his creation and the patterns present in it. There are countless similarities present across the species and genera of living things. In so many ways, man is similar to the animals, so much so that man has come to be defined as a rational "animal." He is placed in the class of animals, with the distinguishing difference that he is "rational." There is a *pattern* in what God has done in his creation. Holy Scripture specifically says that God made man in his own image, in the image of God he created him (Genesis 1:27) — and yet man is also

so like the animals. Therefore the animals are also, though more remotely, made in the image of God. God's creative action leaves a divine imprint. Let us pass from the evidence in creation of a divine pattern of acting, to Sacred Scripture — the inspired record of God's saving action in history. There is a pattern here too. The God of the patriarchs and prophets acts in "characteristic" ways. He repeatedly hates and punishes sin. He calls a certain people for a mission, and within this chosen people he calls certain individuals for their mission. God intervened and from the Burning Bush spoke to Moses, sending him to lead his people out of slavery to a promised land. In the event, this was a type of what was to come. It was a "characteristic" way in which God acts to save his people. Jesus Christ is portrayed in the Gospels as a new Moses, and his Passion and Death is a more glorious repeat of what God did in the past, but surpassing the past. So, in the liberation effected by Jesus Christ, God was acting "in character" — and this was itself a confirmation that it was the same God who was now doing this extraordinary work

of salvation. The same divine hand can be recognized as had been working before. There is something of this in our Gospel today in which our Lord tells the people many things in parables. He takes ordinary natural processes and shows that they are types of much higher divine action. As God acts in nature, so his action in our souls can be discerned. *“Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop — a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear”* (Matthew 13: 1 9). Nature is the voice of God, showing his ways.

Specifically, as our Lord will go on to say, God feeds the soil of the soul with the seed of his word, and if our heart and soul is good soil, that seed will produce a harvest. Let us, though, take a broad view and see all things as coming from the hand of the great Being we call God our Father. His ways are wondrous, they are mighty, they are holy and they are loving. Let us study them in order to know *him* more and more, so as to love him the more dearly and follow him the more closely. The ways of God

reveal his life and his nature — *his character*. Let us use our days so as to come to know, love and serve him here on earth so as to see and enjoy him forever in heaven.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 13:1-9)

“That same day Jesus left the house and sat by the lakeside” The scenes of the Gospels are simple and marked by the ordinary. In our Gospel scene today (Matthew 13:1-9) Our Lord is presented as seated in the boat teaching the people who stand on the beach listening. Let us place ourselves in that scene, now watching the people, now watching Jesus who is teaching. Gazing at Jesus let us consider *who he is*. He is *God*. It is God in the flesh who is before those people, God seemingly so ordinary, so accessible, so immediate and so much part of the life of those listening. Almighty God made man — what a thought! If only we could realize this and take to heart his teaching! Just as the people were there listening to God, so we as members of the Church are able to listen to

God made man teaching us in and through the teaching Church. But we must learn to recognise his presence and maintain that recognition constantly. It is the mystery of the Incarnation. We must never take this mystery for granted, for if we do we might lose our respect for the person of Jesus. Without realising it, we could begin to treat Jesus as simply a very great man. We shall then treat his teaching as simply that of a very great man, rather than a divine revelation. Moreover, we shall fail to appreciate the mystery of the Church, for the Church is the body of Christ and not merely a human phenomenon. In its head, and in its soul, it is divine. Its head is Jesus Christ. Just as the crowds listened to Jesus seated in the boat, it is to him that we listen when the Church speaks in his name. Its soul is the Holy Spirit, by whose power God became man, and by whose power the Church was born at Pentecost.

Let us base ourselves, our lives and all our thought on the mystery of the Incarnation.



Thursday of the sixteenth week in Ordinary Time

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Collect Show favour, O Lord, to your servants and mercifully increase the gifts of your grace, that, made fervent in hope, faith and charity, they may be ever watchful in keeping your commands. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 2:1-3.7-8.12-13; Psalm 35;

Matthew 13: 10-17

The disciples came to Jesus and asked, Why do you speak to the people in parables? He replied, The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not

have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables: Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.' But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it. (Matthew 13:10-17)

Seeing and hearing St. John Henry Newman was born on February 21, 1801, and during his seventeenth year he enrolled in Trinity College, Oxford. This began an involvement with Oxford University that would last for nearly thirty years. A little over a year after receiving his bachelor's degree in 1820, he was admitted as a Fellow of

Oriel College. Following his ordination as a deacon in 1824, then as an Anglican priest in 1825, he became an Oriel tutor in 1826, and Vicar of St Marys Church (Oxford) in 1828. Two years before this, during 1826, there arrived on the scene of Oxford an unusual personage, Joseph Blanco White (born José María Blanco Crespo, 1775-1841), who was admitted as a Fellow of Oriel towards the end of the year. He and Newman quickly became friends, a friendship that was not destined to last when Newman's thoroughgoing Catholic positions developed and became manifest. The fact was that Blanco White hated the Catholic Church and had published extensively in England against the Church of Rome. Indeed, he was awarded his academic diploma by Oxford University precisely because of these publications and their perceived effectiveness. He himself was a Spaniard, though of Irish descent, and had been ordained a Catholic priest in Spain in 1800 — the year prior to Newman's birth in London. Following his ordination, deep-seated religious doubts emerged and he escaped to England during the

Peninsular War. There he lived the remaining 31 years of his life passing from virtual atheism, to Anglicanism (during which he received Anglican Orders), to Unitarianism. He died in denial of the Incarnation, the Atonement, the doctrine of the Trinitarian godhead, and of course the divine institution of the Catholic Church. The one constant in his life from within a few years of his ordination in Spain, was hatred for the Church in which he was raised and ordained. Newman and he were fast friends for the first few years of their period together at Oxford. But Blanco White was increasingly appalled as Newman's true colours emerged, which included his championship of orthodox dogma and the divine foundation of the Church. For his part, Newman came to see the tragedy of Blanco White's life. He was sincere, Newman finally judged, but profoundly blind to the truth, and this blindness was rooted in a spiritual and moral decay.

In a spiritual and religious sense, Blanco White's tragedy was total. He was born into a devout Spanish Catholic environment, was baptized and lost everything.

Nothing is impossible for God, as our Lord said to his disciples, but a person is playing with fire if he knowingly turns his back on God and his revelation. He may be rendering himself impervious to the intervention of God's sovereign grace. Let this introduction serve to bring us to our Gospel today, in which our Lord, commenting on his use of parables in speaking to the people, warns of the consequences of spiritual blindness. The spiritual blindness of which our Lord speaks is not some mere accident of personal limitation. Such a form of it, conceivably, is possible. What Our Lord is speaking of is a blindness that is, obscurely, self-inflicted. *"Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.'"* Because of this blindness, this deafness, this incomprehension, our Lord does not speak directly to them. This is because they could not understand and, we might add, perhaps their guilt would increase were our Lord to speak more plainly. Thus

he spoke to them in parables. They will always be hearing but never understanding, always seeing but never perceiving. But what is especially important is the reason our Lord gives, citing the prophecy of Isaiah, for their blindness. *“For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them”* (Matthew 13:10-17). In their heart of hearts they do *not want* to hear nor to see because this means listening to the divine demand *to change*. This they do not *want* to do. Thus have their hearts become hardened. Their will is opposed to the divine will. Perhaps they are not very aware of this moral position they have gradually adopted in the hidden chambers of their souls. Gradually the divine presence in their consciences has departed, and all that remains is the proud Self refusing the voice of God.

John Henry Newman, canonized a saint by Pope Francis in October 2019, went on to write and speak of the

importance of the right moral ethos in a person, if that person is ever to arrive at religious truth. There have to be the right starting points, the right first principles, the right fundamental attitudes, if a person is ever to see and hear aright in respect to the things of God. If those fundamental premises are inimical to the voice and will of God, what can be done? Only God can change them, and nothing is impossible to God. But how serious a matter it is, and our Lord's words in today's Gospel are a tremendous warning from on high about it.

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Second reflection:

God's glory Among the great events described in the book of Exodus is the meeting between God and Moses on Sinai. God tells Moses that he is coming and he asks that the people prepare (Exodus 19:9). They are to "*prepare themselves today and tomorrow,*" washing themselves and holding "*themselves in readiness for the third day, because on the third day the Lord will descend*

on the mountain of Sinai” (19:10-11). It was God who was coming, coming in his grandeur and glory, and planning to make his glory manifest. “The mountain of Sinai was entirely wrapped in smoke ... Like smoke from a furnace the smoke went up, and the whole mountain shook violently ... Moses spoke, and God answered him with peals of thunder” (19:16-19), The power and the glory of the one only God, the God of the Hebrews, was being manifested. Now, this same God became man, one of us. He took on a lowlier condition still, dying on a cross. He continues with us as the Head of his body the Church — a people of saints and sinners. He is most present in the Eucharist where his glory is utterly concealed. But it is the same almighty God.

Let us resolve to be alive in faith to his presence with us and to give him constantly the recognition and respect that is his due.



Friday of the sixteenth week in Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: Jeremiah 3:14-17; (Psalm:) Jeremiah 31;
Matthew 13:18-23

Jesus said to his disciples: "Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The one who

received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.” (Matthew 13:18-23)

The work One of the most striking things about the universe is that it is forever “up and doing” — as we may put it. That is to say, there is everywhere a drive to act and to “get things done”. In the question of origins, the “Big Bang” theory is the prevailing cosmological model that describes the early development of the Universe. The Belgian priest-physicist, Father Georges Lemaître (1894–1966) first proposed what would be called (by Fred Hoyle) the “Big Bang” theory. Father Lemaître called it his

“hypothesis of the primeval atom.” In 1927, he proposed that an inferred recession of the spiral nebulae (i.e., other galaxies) was due to the expansion of the Universe. In 1931 he went further and suggested that the evident expansion of the universe, if projected back in time, meant that the further in the past the smaller the universe was, until at some finite time in the past all the mass of the Universe was concentrated into a single point, a “primeval atom” where and when the fabric of time and space came into existence. The point I am making here with this example, though, is that the universe is a vast arena of *action and change*. Further, this action is *purposeful*. It is not chaos and mere chance that the universe ends up in its manifest order. There is action and change, a striving for growth and development everywhere, a great work afoot, even at the inanimate level. Among living things this is far more obvious: living things grow and strive for their perfection. The seed becomes a shoot, a plant, and it is seen endeavouring to reach its term and produce its fruit or flower. The animal cub or tiny tadpole grows, is nurtured

into maturity and works to gain life and the continuance of its species. Now, two things mark the human being — there is his power to *think* and there is his power to *decide*. *Action* is the result: man *acts*, and if he acts in the way he knows he should, that is if he acts morally and fulfils his responsibilities, then he develops not merely physically but precisely as a man. For all the importance of his power to be rational and to be a being of *thought*, there is a certain priority in his *action*. Man must be an *acting* person and not just a thinking one. This is the point, I believe, that Descartes missed. He started with “I think”, instead of “I act”. Human *action* is at the heart of man’s life. Man is found to be *doing* important things, and it is especially *that* fact which implies much for what he *is*.

So, we must *act* if we are to flourish. We must be up and doing — we must be at work. Work is at the centre of man’s flourishing. He will never perfect himself if he does not work at it through his action — and of course his “action” will embrace his intellectual life and not just, say, his physical life. The burning question is, *what* must he

work at? *What* must he do? What must he strive for in life? The supreme work of his life must be the moral life — *doing* what is right and good and in this way *becoming* good himself. It is what he decides to *do*, and what in fact he then *does*, which will determine his stature as a human being. His quality precisely as a human being will depend on the *moral* quality of his actions. But this has to include not merely the range of actions related to this world, but his actions that relate to God. The kind of person he becomes will depend on the actions he takes in relation to the greatest of realities, the Living God, his Lord and Creator. All this is to say, that the most important thing a man can do is attain goodness of life because of his good actions, and sanctity due to his acting in union with and in a manner pleasing to God. Man's supreme calling and his best flourishing is *sanctity*. Man is called to be a *saint*, and if he misses out on this, then no matter whatever else he may do, his flourishing will be minimal in the final analysis. Further, it has been revealed by the Creator that this is precisely his will for man. As St Paul writes, *this is the*

will of God, your sanctification (1 Thessalonians 4:3). That is what God intended from the beginning, and it is what he will intend till the end. Man's Fall was precisely a Fall from sanctity and goodness, and the Fall was great. God's response was to enter the fray himself and restore the radical possibility of sanctity to man. This he did by atoning for man's sin and offering the gift of divine life through faith in Jesus Christ and baptism. But we must get it into our thick heads that the one thing necessary to be striving for, the one great *work* that all men and women must take up with resolution, is *personal sanctity*. It consists in union with Jesus Christ by faith and baptism, lived out in loving obedience. This is the work of life *par excellence*. Man, like other things, is called to action. He must work. But he must choose his work in life well — and the supreme work in life is goodness and holiness of life.

It is this which he must bring to term. The question is, what is going for him in this supreme endeavour? This brings us to our Gospel today (Matthew 13: 18-23), in

which our Lord speaks of the word of God being sown in soil of varied quality. The word of God — his revelation — accompanied by his grace, must be received by good soil. If it is, it will produce the harvest. *“The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”* Much can be said of this, but let us resolve to seek sanctity in life, heartily receiving the word of Jesus Christ and, like good soil, putting it to work in our daily action. Thus will the harvest of sanctity come.



Saturday of the sixteenth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 54 (53):6, 8 See, I have God for my help. The Lord sustains my soul. I will sacrifice to you with willing heart, and praise your name, O Lord, for it is good.

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Scripture today: Exodus 24:3-8; Ps. 49; Matthew 13:24-30

Jesus proposed a parable to the crowds. “The Kingdom of heaven may be likened to a man who sowed good seed in his field. While everyone was asleep his enemy came and sowed weeds all through the wheat, and then went off. When the crop grew and bore fruit, the weeds appeared as well. The slaves of the householder

came to him and said, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where have the weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' His slaves said to him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' He replied, 'No, if you pull up the weeds you might uproot the wheat along with them. Let them grow together until harvest; then at harvest time I will say to the harvesters, "First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles for burning; but gather the wheat into my barn."' (Matthew 13:24-30)

The weeds E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973), the British anthropologist and specialist in the religion of the African Nuer people (and author of *Nuer Religion*), once wrote that a good way to assess and compare primal religions is to ask how its myths and rituals answer to the problem of evil and suffering, and then to compare those answers. At least this statement reminds us of how fundamental and universal is the problem of evil. Evil and suffering are inescapable, and it is the obvious difficulty with any proposition that there is an infinitely good, wise and powerful Being in whose hand lies the being, the

fortunes and the course of the world. The world, many would claim, is a mess and we who are its inhabitants are in constant danger. It is as if one were to say that a magnificently expert builder was responsible for putting up one's home, a home that abounds in safety hazards. There are frequent television programmes bringing shoddy work to the notice of the public. It could be a seriously defective bridge or building that causes great inconvenience and danger to the public. Not only does such work discredit the ability of the builder, but by it he stands accused of being unethical. He cannot do the job, and he should not have done it. In a world of earthquakes, famine, disease, war, death and countless tragedies and disappointments, how can one say that there is an all-holy and infinitely powerful Being in whose Hand all this lies? If there were such a Being, the atheist and utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer once said, he would have done a better job of it. So it is that we have the ever-recurring problem of evil and there is no doubt that it is a great philosophical and religious problem. In his *Apologia* (1864) Blessed John Henry

Newman wrote that the fact of the ocean of evil in the world was the biggest problem for theism. But when all is said and done, there are many things in life we cannot understand and which we discover, all things considered, turn out for the best. We look back on many of the unpleasant events of life and observe how they work out. It is still a beautiful world — but the question remains, why is the bad allowed its presence on the scene?

As has already been said, this problem is one of the most intractable in religion and philosophy. There are many answers, and while most of them serve to illuminate this or that aspect of the problem of evil, none constitute the knock-out blow, as we may say. The greatest practical answer was that provided by God himself when he sent his divine Son to bear upon his shoulders the sin of the world. He atoned for it, and made of suffering a tremendous means of progress in holiness, if borne in a spirit of Christ-like obedience. If we wish to be perfect, we must take up our “cross” — the cross of suffering — and follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. That is a wondrous

practical answer. We are still not informed, though, why suffering and evil had to be permitted in the first place — and our Lord said that he had to *suffer* in order to enter into his glory. Why? Well, such was the inscrutable will and plan of God. As the Book of Job reminds us, we must trust in the wisdom of the Lord. He knows best, and any experience of life will remind us that we know very little, and are all too often mistaken. However, in our Gospel today our Lord throws some light on the matter, as he does on other occasions. Where did the weeds come from? was the question. That is the question from age to age — where did the weeds come from? God planted a Garden, and in that Garden he placed man. But the weeds that are everywhere — where did they come from? *An enemy has done this*, was the answer. Evil and suffering did not come from God. Very well, granted that the Enemy initiated all these weeds which never die out but which are ever alive, ever well and spreading, what to do about it? Why not dig up the weeds, and be done with the problem? Why does not God eliminate evil at a word and by his invincible power?

It is not that simple, our Lord informs us in his parable (Matthew 13:24-30). If you dig up the weeds, the wheat may come with it. Could you not sidestep this problem precisely by your divine power? Our Lord does not answer this, but we are, in effect, told that the best thing is to leave the *total* elimination of evil from the world to the final day of judgment. This, then, is *one* aspect of the practical answer to the problem of evil. It is best that the world continue with the consequences of the Original Sin, and Christ has shown the fruits that are thereby possible. There were weeds all around our Lord as he strove to announce and establish the Kingdom. Those weeds were toxic and lethal. He did not eliminate them but in a spirit of obedience to his heavenly Father he gave himself up to the Cross. He bore witness to the truth before his enemies and atoned for the sin of the world. Let us be filled with the optimism of the Christian faith as we face the evil and suffering that is an unavoidable feature of our beautiful, broken and sinful world.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 13:24-30)

“Sir, ...where does the darnel come from? Some enemy has done this” Cardinal Newman once wrote that were it not for the unmistakable testimony of Conscience to the reality of a holy God, the fact of so much evil would lead him to be an atheist. The man in the parable was asked “*where does the darnel come from?*” So too many have asked, where does evil come from, for surely God can be the source only of good? The answer of the owner in the parable was, “*Some enemy has done this.*” Evil does not come from God but from fallen man and from Satan. It comes from sin and rebellion against God. In the parable the owner, when asked whether to uproot the darnel, replies “*No, because when you weed out the darnel you might pull up the wheat with it.*” We must be patient with what God is patient with, and work to produce good fruit despite the continued presence of evil and suffering. The harvest will be greater as a result.

Exactly why God permits evil to continue we do not know, but we do know that all is in his hands and that he certainly knows best what to do. At harvest time the darnel will be burnt, and the wheat gathered into the barn.



Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 68 (67):6 7, 36 God is in his holy place, God who unites those who dwell in his house; he himself gives might and strength to his people.

Collect O God, protector of those who hope in you, without whom nothing has firm foundation, nothing is holy, bestow in abundance your mercy upon us and grant that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may use the good things that pass in such a way as to hold fast even now to those that ever endure. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Kings 3:5, 7-12; Psalm 119:57, 72, 76-77, 127-130; Romans 8:28-30; Matthew 13:44-52

Jesus said to his disciples: The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a

merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it. Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Have you understood all these things? Jesus asked. Yes, they replied. He said to them, Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old. (Matthew 13:44-52)

Christ in Christian marriage One of the most beautiful things in the world is rightly ordered human love. The love between human beings is celebrated in literature, music, song and the arts, and has been so, age after age.

Such love reaches a high point in married love when a man and a woman give themselves to each other in an unbreakable bond of love, open to the gift of new life. At the same time marriage can be the source of much pain and suffering. Beautiful yet difficult, it must be worked at. It is a high vocation requiring the best life-long efforts of those whose calling it is. Importantly, it requires the help of God — and our Gospel passage today has something to say about this. Our Lord said that the *Kingdom of Heaven is within you*. What was he referring to? St Paul writes in one of his Letters that *this is the mystery now revealed, Christ in you, your hope of glory*. The Kingdom of Heaven has its centre and basis in the person of Christ. It is in him and by means of him that the Kingdom of Heaven, or rule of God, is present in its perfection. Now, Christ abides within the soul of the Christian who is in the state of grace. He is within us, as our hope of glory. This applies to married life. Today's Gospel passage (Matthew 13:44-52) offers us an image that is full of meaning for married life. *“The Kingdom of Heaven is like treasure hidden in a field*

which someone has found; he hides it again, goes off happy, sells everything he owns and buys the field.” The treasure which is hidden in the field of a Christian marriage is the person of Christ. He is the important One abiding there, the One who gives hope to the marriage, like a treasure in the field. When two Christians marry, a third Person enters the relationship and brings his own life and love for them into their love for one another. That person is Christ. He is the greatest treasure of the marriage, their greatest source of hope. The Church teaches that God unites the two who are marrying. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ comes to dwell within the married life of the couple and gives them a share in his own love for them. Their love for one another is transformed into a sign and channel of Christ’s love for them.

That is to say, their love becomes something much greater than simply a mutual human love. It is made into a sacrament of Christ’s love. Christ is the bridegroom of the Church. In uniting the Church to himself, he imparts to the Church a share in his own divine life and love. In a

parallel way, and as part of this communion between Christ and his Church, the same conferral of Christ's life occurs in a Christian marriage when the spouses are in the state of grace. They share Christ's life and love, enabling them to love one another with a share in the love with which Christ loves them. Because of their joint union with Christ they become channels of Christ's life and love to one another, and the divine grace which they impart to one another in their life of mutual love will mutually sanctify them. It will lead them on to holiness and transform them more and more into the likeness of Christ — provided they live according to this grace. And because of this, they themselves become an image and symbol to others of the union of Christ with the Church. This represents their primary apostolic mission to others: to show forth the love of Christ. If this great promise is to blossom, every married couple must recognise the treasure that is hidden in the field of their married life, the pearl of great price that has been given to them. It is *Christ in you*, Christ in each of you and in your married life, *your hope of glory*. Their

work is to make Christ the centre and soul of their married life, their daily inspiration, their source of hope. Christ must not be forgotten in what we might call the dust and grime of daily life. He it is who makes of a humdrum life a thing of beauty. He it is who makes the ordinary life a life of grandeur: provided we live for him and according to his word and will. Let every married couple, then, make Christ their daily treasure and the treasure of their children. It means living daily in his presence together as man and wife, praying to him, constantly asking his help in living up to their vocation. It means following a true plan of life in the pursuit of holiness, knowing that Christ constantly dwells in their midst as their bond of unity.

Every family has a model: for the Christian family it is the Holy Family. Mary and Joseph were incomparable jewels of spiritual beauty, and they had in their midst the Star of all stars, the ineffable One, Jesus Christ. By virtue of the Sacrament of Matrimony, he, the same Jesus Christ, abides in the heart of every Christian family in order to sanctify the family and each member of it. Christ is the

treasure in their field, their pearl of great price. Let each Christian family make it their work in life to allow Christ to reign in their hearts, and to bring him who is the Redeemer of man to their environments in the world of daily life.



Monday of the seventeenth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 68 (67):6 7, 36 God is in his holy place, God who unites those who dwell in his house; he himself gives might and strength to his people.

Collect O God, protector of those who hope in you, without whom nothing has firm foundation, nothing is holy, bestow in abundance your mercy upon us and grant that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may use the good things that pass in such a way as to hold fast even now to those that ever endure. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 13:1-11; Deuteronomy 32:18-21;
Matthew 13:31-35

He told them another parable: The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a

tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches. He told them still another parable: The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough. Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world. (Matthew 13:31-35)

Trust One of the most obvious things about the saint is his optimism. But it is an optimism based, not on mere personal temperament, ability, or past experience of good fortune, but on what God has revealed. It can therefore be present in a temperament that inclines towards pessimism and with a past experience of disappointments and injustice. The hope that drives is based on what God has revealed. The paradigm example is, of course, Jesus Christ who faced terrible reversals and disappointments, but who never lost his “optimism”, as we might (somewhat inappropriately) call it. All was based on the divine plan.

His passion and death, so terrible a thing to face, was the pathway by which he was going to the Father and to his glory — and ours. During his trial before the Sanhedrin, the high priest put him on oath to state whether he was the Messiah, the Son of God — which they knew to be his claim. His answer would provide the pretext they sought and lead immediately to his death sentence. But he gave it: *“You have said it. I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven”* (Matthew 26: 63-64, and Mark 14: 61-62). Again, humanly speaking, what could have been more totally discouraging and depressing, what could have driven away all “optimism”, than his last hours hanging on the Cross? There is no questioning the depths of his suffering — indeed, we read of him uttering the Psalm that has the words: *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* (Mark 15:34). But what do we also notice? There was something so striking about him that the dying criminal by his side was moved to describe him to his companion criminal as one who had *done nothing wrong*.

He then turned to Christ and asked, “*Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingly power*” — and this was during his crucifixion! But then Christ, about to die an ignominious death, said to him, “*Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise*” (Luke 23: 39-43). Amid the apparent reversals, there was an unconquerable certitude in the heart of Jesus Christ as to the final upshot of all. This is the kind of “optimism” which is characteristic of, and based on, revealed religion. It is an “optimism” proved in the event to be the surest thing of all — the event being Christ’s rising from the dead as he had promised, and on the third day as he had foretold.

One of the most characteristic qualities of the Christian spirit is trust in the power and grace of God, who is so rich in mercy and compassion. It is this grace, this power, this divine action within the world and within the heart of man, which is man’s true hope. It has been won for us by Jesus Christ, and it is available to us through union with him. The fact and gift of grace issues in trust. St Mary MacKillop in 1883 said that “when I could not see

my way, God kept my heart full of trust to make all come right.” It is a trust that relates to what happens in one’s own individual life and in the life of the Church at large. Time and again in the history of the Church, there have been massive crises, with little light showing at the end of the tunnel. The tenth century papacy is a case in point. *Saeculum obscurum* (Latin for *the dark age*) is a name given to the Papacy during the first half of the 10th century, beginning with the installation of Pope Sergius III in 904 and lasting for sixty years until the death of Pope John XII in 964. During this period, the Popes were influenced strongly by a powerful and corrupt aristocratic family, the Theophylacti, and their relatives. It has to be said that the popes of the tenth century were a sorry lot, both by character and by circumstance. Rome was continually threatened by Muslims, and there was no king or emperor strong enough to defend them. Becoming Bishop of Rome was a matter of winning out in the various feuds that raged. At the same time, the monasteries of Europe suffered from the hammer blows of Viking,

Magyar and Muslim. The Celtic monasteries of Ireland and Britain were virtually wiped out. The French and German monasteries had little discipline and less learning. But despite this situation came the great surge of renewal in the following century. Crisis after crisis has been seen in and by the Church — and our own day has its serious crises, a day distinguished by great and holy popes throughout the twentieth century and into the first years of the twenty-first. But the point here is that the power and grace of Christ is present sustaining the many vessels of clay. All this brings us to our Gospel today (Matthew 13:31-35), in which our Lord speaks of the kingdom of heaven — it is like a mustard seed, so vulnerable, but *destined* for powerful growth.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.” The kingdom of heaven is the lordship of God. It is his

dominion. This is present in its fullness in Jesus Christ, in whom is present *the fullness of the Godhead bodily*. Christ's mission is to extend this divine lordship everywhere, which he does in and through his Church. Since it is Jesus Christ and his divine Spirit which is at work in our lives and in the Church, let us ever trust, for trust we may!



Tuesday of the seventeenth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 68 (67):6 7, 36 God is in his holy place, God who unites those who dwell in his house; he himself gives might and strength to his people.

Collect O God, protector of those who hope in you, without whom nothing has firm foundation, nothing is holy, bestow in abundance your mercy upon us and grant that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may use the good things that pass in such a way as to hold fast even now to those that ever endure. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 14:17-22; Psalm 78;

Matthew 13:36-43

Jesus dismissed the crowds and went into the house. His disciples approached him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field." He said in reply, "He who sows good seed is the Son of Man, the field is the

world, the good seed the children of the Kingdom. The weeds are the children of the Evil One, and the enemy who sows them is the Devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. Just as weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his Kingdom all who cause others to sin and all evildoers. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears ought to hear.” (Matthew 13:36-43)

Judgment Everywhere we see *consequences* at work. Things happen, and *consequences* flow from them. A cyclone suddenly arises, gathers size, strength and momentum, and vast numbers of people are left devastated — these are the terrible *consequences* of the passing through of the cyclone. Again, there is rain, wonderful rain, and the *consequences* are a great harvest and much joy. There are philosophers who deny the reality of

consequence or causation. They think that there is only succession, and that there is no proof that one thing is the consequence of another — but this flies in the face of common sense and what we may call the voice of mankind. If you hit the cricket ball with the cricket bat, the ball will be made to travel in a certain direction. There you have an instance of causation and consequence — it is not a matter of mere succession. The universe abounds with an incalculable series of causes and *effects* — of consequences — to such an extent that one could say that the world is essentially a cauldron of *consequences* issuing from *causation*. So much is this the case that the world requires a First Cause to give to it a fundamental intelligibility. But let us pass on from this all-pervasive feature of the non-human world to mankind. Mankind itself, the dominant occupier of this world, is a vast phenomenon. No-one could possibly calculate the number of human beings there have been — but again, here too there is the phenomenon of *consequences*. Wherever man is, he acts, and there are consequences flowing from his action. Just

as mankind is a tremendous fact, so are the consequences of his actions in history. There is a radical difference between the consequences flowing from the things that happen in the physical and non-human world and those that flow from the actions of mankind. Man acts freely. He can do one thing or another, whereas the non-human world must act in a certain way. The prowling lion must act in a certain way — in the way, that is, that its instinct dictates. Man has instincts, tendencies, and temperament. But he has the capacity to *choose*. He can choose to act merely in accord with his tendencies and needs, or he can act according to what he sees to be his duty. Whatever way he chooses to act, there will be *consequences*.

Not only does man see that there are consequences flowing from the free choices he makes, but everywhere he sees facing him a judgment on his free choices. In fact, very commonly the *judgment* that is made on him as a result of his choices is regarded as their *principal* consequence. He freely chooses to raise a large family, spends himself on the proper upbringing of his children, is

successful in their spiritual and moral formation — and in *consequence* is *judged* by others to be a good man, and is praised and respected as a result. His ordinary human experience is that everywhere he is *judged* on his actions and their consequences — indeed, that *judgment* is itself a principal consequence of his actions. More seriously, in many areas of life he is rewarded or punished by society for his free actions and their consequences. The reward or the punishment is a consequence of his actions, which is to say his free choices insofar as they bear on society and its wellbeing. A person chooses to bring prohibited drugs into a country and is apprehended, tried, condemned, and is either executed or imprisoned for life. In fact, we could say that the principal consequence of man's free choice, of the actions he chooses to do, is the *judgment* that will be made on him, and the consequences of that judgment. The human being is one who can choose freely, and as a result is one who will be *judged* — and rewarded or punished accordingly. That reward or punishment is deemed to be the due consequence of his own choice. So it is that man is

the being in the universe who is always facing a *judgment* in one form or another. The crown and climax of this is nothing other than the judgment of God. But we ought not think that this divine judgment is something simply at the end — in the way there is a final test and judgment at the end of a long course of study. All that we do is being continually judged by God. In all of our choices, we stand in the presence of our divine Judge. While we live, we are able to repent, change, reform our free choices (with divine grace), and do better. At the end, no such opportunity will lie before us. We shall go before our Judge for a final, eternal judgment.

In our Gospel today our Lord speaks in the simplest terms of the consequences of our actions and of the divine judgment we shall all face. *“The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his Kingdom all who cause others to sin and all evildoers. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father”* (Matthew 13:36-43). Let

us look to the consequences of our actions and to the final judgment that they, our chosen actions and their consequences, will assuredly attract. Death, judgment, heaven and hell — it all hinges on our free actions, all of which have their consequences.

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Second reflection:

Realization In the Book of Exodus we read that whenever Moses went to the Tent of Meeting to converse with the Lord, the people would rise and stand at the door of their tents watching Moses till he reached the Tent of meeting. When they saw the pillar of cloud at the entrance of the Tent, they would bow low, standing. This entire procedure was filled with reverence and a sense of the presence of God (Exodus: chapters 33,34,37). Now, let us ask, to what degree is this careful and manifest reverence present in *our churches*, our own “Tent of meeting”? If it is lacking, presumably it is because of a lack of a sense of the presence of God. Yet the Catholic knows and believes that

Christ is God, and that he abides in our Tabernacles. He makes himself and his one Sacrifice of Calvary present at Mass. We accept this great and pivotal truth as revealed by God. What then is missing? Of course, we do not physically see what we accept to be true. We do not depend on sight to know this reality. Rather we depend on faith in the authority of God's word. To have a living faith we must *realise* what we believe, and this *realisation* requires persistent thought, prolonged and frequent meditation and contemplation of the truths of our faith.

We have to take time to read, ponder and pray over what God has revealed if we are to reach a true *realisation* of it, the kind of realisation which will show itself in manifest reverence. A practical resolution then: Let us make daily spiritual reading and regular prayerful study of the truths of the faith an essential feature of our life.



Wednesday of the seventeenth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 68 (67):6 7, 36 God is in his holy place, God who unites those who dwell in his house; he himself gives might and strength to his people.

Collect O God, protector of those who hope in you, without whom nothing has firm foundation, nothing is holy, bestow in abundance your mercy upon us and grant that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may use the good things that pass in such a way as to hold fast even now to those that ever endure. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 15:10.16-21; Psalm 58;

Matthew 13:44-46

Jesus said to his disciples: “The Kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field, which a person finds and hides again, and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the Kingdom of heaven is like a

merchant searching for fine pearls. When he finds a pearl of great price, he goes and sells all that he has and buys it.” (Matthew 13:44-46)

The Kingdom For a long time one of the most marketed and marketable products has been *news*. The *news* and its commentary is the source of unending and vast business, careers, profits and interest. The press and its equivalents in the various forms of media are a central component of the modern society. Modern life is almost unimaginable without the news media and journalistic and editorial commentary on the news. The news media can bring down governments, disrupt economies and can seriously disturb the practice of religion and the life of churches. Pope St. Paul VI, during his visit to Australia in 1970, told the journalists assembled to hear him that they were world power number one. A major focus of the media is politics and the fortunes of, we might say for want of a better term, the kingdoms of the world. The image that is projected of the world by its most powerful modern influence, the media, is of the ebb and flow of *kingdoms*.

Societies, republics, nations rise and fall, they interact, they enter into conflict or alliances. They pass away and are succeeded by others. History is the story of the *kingdoms* of this world — that is the impression we gain from our various sources of information. Two thousand years ago, the mightiest kingdom was that of Rome. So strong was the Roman Empire that when it began to crumble at the onslaught of the barbarian hordes, many thought the end of the world was nigh. It evoked one of St Augustine’s greatest works, *De civitate dei* (*On the City of God*, consisting of 22 books). But Rome passed away, as did so many “kingdoms” that followed it. Modern man probably thinks of his times as an unfolding contest between competing regimes, including the one of which he is part by birth and nationality. He may wonder what it all adds up to, and whether all this has any ultimate meaning. Is there anything final and ultimately worthwhile under the sun? Well now, what has God revealed of all this? God has revealed that history is indeed made up of the ongoing ebb and flow of kingdoms and regimes, understood in the broad

sence. But there is more than this. A Kingdom has arrived on the earth that is in this world but not of it. It is God's Kingdom, an eternal Kingdom, one destined to prevail over all others, and which will be everlasting. Its throne is occupied by one Man, and all mankind is called to enter that Kingdom.

Every Christian knows what is being referred to here. There were powerful hints of the coming Kingdom in various of the Old Testament books of the Bible. God's Kingdom was coming, and there would be a King. David was promised that his dynasty would never end. The New Testament interprets these various prophecies and the great Promise of the Old Testament. Christ is its interpretation and its fulfilment. He is the King who established the Kingdom. Speaking simply, the promised Kingdom is God's promised *rule*, now and in eternity. Pope Benedict XVI in his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, gives us three dimensions of the idea of the Kingdom of God. The first is Jesus himself. He is the Kingdom in person. By entering into a union of obedient friendship with him, one enters the

Kingdom. This necessarily involves man's interior — for that reason, Jesus said that the Kingdom is within you. That is the second feature of the Kingdom. The third involves the Church, for Christ established his Church by means of which people would be enabled to enter into union with him, and so enter into the Kingdom of God. That Church was and is a visible body — for instance, he gave to Peter, the Rock of his Church, the keys of the Kingdom of heaven, with power to bind and loose. The one who has entered into the Kingdom and partaken *fully* of its life is the Christian saint. He is united with Christ and shares in his life, as it is available to him in his body the Church. All of this brings us to our Gospel today, in which our Lord gives images of the Kingdom of God. *“The Kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field, which a person finds and hides again, and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the Kingdom of heaven is like a merchant searching for fine pearls. When he finds a pearl of great price, he goes and sells all that he has and buys it”* (Matthew 13:44-46). No

one parable attempts to exhaust the full meaning and richness of the Kingdom of God — our two brief parables today tell us that the Kingdom of God is the supreme treasure of our life, for which we should be prepared to forego all in order to gain it. This is what the saint does so generously. If we are to make of the Kingdom — which is union with the person of Jesus Christ our Lord and King — the supreme treasure of our life, we have to be detached from other treasures. The problem is that we tend to make other things the supreme treasures of our life. At least our heart is set on other treasures to a point, and this distracts our heart from the supreme treasure which is Christ. We, each of us, were and are the treasure of the heart of Jesus — let us think of this, the love of Jesus Christ for each of us. St Paul wrote, *Christ loved me and gave himself up for me*. Let us think of that. It will help us to accept Jesus Christ as the supreme treasure of our lives. He is our pearl, the one thing necessary, the treasure beyond imagining.

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Second reflection:

The Church In the Book of Exodus we read of the meeting of God with Moses, and how Moses passed on to the chosen people the commands of God. Moses was one of the great personages of human history, and was endowed with a very great mission. He spoke to God the Creator, and received personally from him his commands — commands not only for his chosen people, but in the Ten Commandments, commands for all mankind. As we think of Moses the bearer of God's teaching and wishes, we think of the One who was far greater still: Jesus Christ. Moses bore with him the Law of God. Christ came with the fullness of God's truth and with the grace to live according to it. But, then, thinking of Christ, we think of the body — the mystical body, we might say — which bears Christ and his Law and grace within it. That is to say, we think of the Church, the Catholic Church which possesses within her the Person of Christ and all he has brought to man. The Book of Exodus today shows the reverence and attention of the people towards Moses: after

their hesitation, “*all the sons of Israel came closer, and he passed on to them all the orders that the Lord had given him on the mountain of Sinai.*” We in our turn ought preserve in our hearts a profound reverence and attention to the Church, Christ’s body and oracle. The Church is the oracle of Christ, just as, let us say, Moses was the oracle of Yahweh to the people and the bearer of his Law.

Let us not take the Church for granted, but keep alive our realisation of the divine presence within the Church that distinguishes it from all other institutions. Let us think with the Church, and by our fidelity to her teaching advance towards holiness of life.



Thursday of the seventeenth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 68 (67):6 7, 36 God is in his holy place, God who unites those who dwell in his house; he himself gives might and strength to his people.

Collect O God, protector of those who hope in you, without whom nothing has firm foundation, nothing is holy, bestow in abundance your mercy upon us and grant that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may use the good things that pass in such a way as to hold fast even now to those that ever endure. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 18:1-6; Psalm 145;

Matthew 13:47-53

Jesus said, Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in

baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Have you understood all these things? Jesus asked. Yes, they replied. He said to them, Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old. When Jesus had finished these parables, he moved on from there. (Matthew 13:47-53)

Good and bad Years ago I knew a man whose work was to shear sheep — on Mondays he would travel to a sheep station (what an American would call a “ranch”) and spend the rest of the week there shearing sheep. He would then return to his family for the week-end, and would attend Sunday Mass with his family in his parish. He told me that on one Monday when he was travelling to his place of work, his shearing companion sarcastically referred to his going to Sunday Mass. “You think you are

good, do you, in going to church on Sundays?” In response, he told his companion that he did not go to “church on Sundays” because he was “good,” but because he needed to. That shearer happened to be a good man — I knew him. But it is a common accusation by those who do not go to church, that those who do go are *not good*. They appear good on Sundays, and are not good during the week. Now, there is no reason why we need not admit that, to a point, this may be the case. Actually, the fact of the matter is that most who are baptized do not formally practice their religion in any recognizable, let alone notable, sense. For instance, most Catholics do not go to Mass every Sunday, despite the Third Commandment and the corresponding precept of the Church requiring Sunday Mass under pain of serious sin. This is not to speak of the lack of a Christian life during the workaday week. What is to be said of this situation, and of a Church which Christ founded being thus populated by so many who are anything but saints? Again, among the images publicized of the beatification Mass of Pope John Paul II in Rome, on

May 1, 2011, was one which showed the then-President of Zimbabwe, receiving Holy Communion. All across the world these images were seen and they shocked many Catholics in Africa who, with others, charged the President with responsibility for the persecution and destruction of many innocent persons. Setting aside the question of whether a particular person ought be admitted to Holy Communion, and the fact that the reception of Holy Communion is generally a matter for the “internal forum,” the point here is the anomaly of so many sinners making up the Holy Catholic Church, sinners within and beyond the Sunday worshipping congregation of the faithful.

In our Gospel today, our Lord describes what the Kingdom of God is like — and it is about this Kingdom that our Lord spoke so much, and which by his Death and Resurrection he established on this earth. *“Jesus said, Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw*

the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age” (Matthew 13:47-53). So there are all sorts of fish in the net, both good and bad. In the parable itself, the “fishermen” are the “angels” separating the good and the bad at the end of the age. In another and extended sense, the “fishermen” may be taken as being all those who engage in Christ’s apostolic mission, most especially the Twelve and those who succeed the Twelve or who are their direct collaborators. Our Lord in calling Simon Peter to follow him, said, *Follow me, and I will make you into fishers of men*. So the “fishermen” of the parable we can take to be all those who share in Christ’s apostolic mission. They bring in numbers of fish, and there are bad and good. Christ called the Twelve, but even one of the Twelve turned out so bad as to betray him into the hands of his enemies. However we might understand it, Christ pronounced a terrible woe upon him, saying that *it would have been better had he not been born*. In its essence, the Kingdom of Heaven consists of those who are in union with Jesus Christ, and Christ is present wherever his

Church is. The Church is his body, and he is its Head. But associated with Christ, just as Judas was associated with Christ, are many “fish” who are “bad.” So we must not be surprised that there are within the Fold of Jesus Christ many black sheep, let us say. There are many bad fish. He came to call sinners to repentance, he said. In another parable about the Kingdom, Christ spoke of weeds appearing with the wheat. Christ does not take up the whip and cast them all out. He did not expel Judas whose heart had become disaffected — our Lord referred to him as “a devil” following his announcement of the doctrine of the Eucharist. He did not throw him out of the Apostolic band. He gave him time, and right to the end, in the Garden at the point of betrayal, he addressed him as “Friend.” God is patient.

Because of Jesus Christ its divine Head, and because of the Holy Spirit its divine Soul and Life, the Church is holy. It cannot be reduced simply to a vast body of broken, fallen human beings. It is not the ecclesiastical equivalent of a united nations with all their vagaries. Ordinary human

beings are there, but the reality of the Church is far greater than her human members. The Church is principally the Person of Jesus Christ here on earth, sharing his divine Spirit with those who are associated with him as members of his body. Nevertheless, it is like the net with good and bad fish, like a field with wheat and weeds. Nearly 10% of Christ's Twelve turned out *very* bad. I refer to *Judas*. Simon, the future Rock of his Church, denied him three times – though he immediately repented. We are sinners, but the Good News is that if we keep close to Christ, he can make us saints. Let us keep close to him then!

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Second reflection:

Reverence Consider the care with which Moses did everything that related to God's presence in the Tabernacle (Exodus 40:16). Moses "*did exactly as the Lord had directed him.*" These words refer to Moses' construction of the Tabernacle. Then "*Whenever the cloud rose from the tabernacle the sons of Israel would resume their march*"

(Ex 40:36). We too are on the march, and our journey has as its destination our homeland of heaven. God has his Tabernacle among us — it is the Tabernacle of our churches where the Eucharistic Jesus constantly dwells. All that God has ordained that relates to worship and prayer in our churches — as laid down by the Church — ought be fulfilled with the religious care that we see exemplified by Moses in our passage today. Moses, in this as in other things, points to what was to come.

But all of this hinges on our degree of faith. We cannot rise to this level of religious observance and reverence if in effect we are living by sight and not by faith. How then shall we maintain a life of living faith, believing in what we cannot see as if we do see? Living by faith requires contemplation of the mysteries of our faith, assiduous spiritual reading, study of Scripture and the Church's teaching, and personal prayer based on what is thus revealed. Let us include all this in our daily life.



Friday of the seventeenth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 68 (67):6 7, 36 God is in his holy place, God who unites those who dwell in his house; he himself gives might and strength to his people.

Collect O God, protector of those who hope in you, without whom nothing has firm foundation, nothing is holy, bestow in abundance your mercy upon us and grant that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may use the good things that pass in such a way as to hold fast even now to those that ever endure. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 26:1-9; Psalm 68;

Matthew 13:54-58

Coming to his home town, Jesus began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers? they asked. Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his

mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things? And they took offence at him. But Jesus said to them, Only in his home town and in his own house is a prophet without honour. And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith. (Matthew 13:54-58)

Jesus of Nazareth In our day, monarchies are, with rare exceptions, constitutional and largely figurehead in significance. The monarch is loved the more for this, as no unpopular executive decisions can be laid at his feet. Usually in history, the monarch was a member of a dynastic family, and at times the monarch was overthrown and a new family thereupon constituted the dynasty. One way of viewing, narrating and analysing history is to consider the establishment of dynasties and kingdoms. It is certainly an important element shaping history. One feature of dynasties is that because of the succession of the children of monarchs, the future monarch is often well known. There is not the slightest surprise at his

assumption of the throne. Now, there was a people in classical times which century after century expected a great King, one appointed by God himself, and one intended by divine plan to rule not only his own people but the peoples of the world. This forecast had been in possession for at least a thousand years, even if the details were far from clear. King David had received the prophecy that his throne would last forever, and Abraham long before him had been told from on high that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed. A famed anointed King was coming — and word of this had actually got beyond the chosen people. Something about it was “in the air”. No authenticated and approved prophet had claimed the messianic role. There had been and would be occasional claimants — but they came to nothing. But suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, there appeared Jesus of Nazareth claiming not only to establish this divine dominion but much more. He was the Messiah and the Son of the Living God. It was not a claim made in stentorian manner — but the claim grew rapidly, dramatically. The

Kingdom of God was near, it was about to be launched and established, and the King was manifestly Jesus of Nazareth. The point here, though, is that Christ's appearance on the scene of the nation was *sudden*. Prior to the beginning of his public ministry, he was virtually *unknown* — and this is implied in our gospel passage today (Matthew 13: 54-58). When our Lord returned to his native village, the surprise was great: “*Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers? they asked. Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us?*”

Prior to his appearance on the public scene, Jesus Christ led a life of quiet obscurity. He was an unnoticed villager of an unnoticed village. That Nazareth was barely “on the map” and that its inhabitants were scarcely the object of attention, is indicated by St John in his Gospel when he narrates the words of Nathanael on being told of Jesus of *Nazareth*. Philip of Bethsaida told him that “*we have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the*

prophets wrote – Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. Nathanael said to him, Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (1:45-46). The village was unnoticed, as was our Lord himself. Our Lord’s own obscurity is suggested by the reaction of his own townspeople when he returned, as narrated in our Gospel today. He was now a religious celebrity in Galilee. But when he returned to Nazareth to offer himself to his townsmen for their belief, they would not go beyond their perception of him that had characterized the years before. *“And they took offence at him. But Jesus said to them, Only in his home town and in his own house is a prophet without honour. And he did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.”* This reaction to Jesus shows the authenticity of the Incarnation. The Second Person of the Blessed Trinity had truly become man. He had become a member of a family and of a wider circle of relatives and of a particular village. He had lived a normal life in that setting, with others perceiving in him nothing more than a very good human being. Doubtless they could not help but see in him an exceptional moral

and spiritual stature. They would never have seen sin in him, never any moral fault, and in his daily round of work and quiet participation in the life of the small town, nothing would have been seen to warrant the slightest moral criticism. But it was a very ordinary life nevertheless, and nothing was seen to constitute notice of the great things to come. Little did they realize that here was the King of kings and the Lord of lords, the One who would occupy the throne of David forever, the promised Messiah, the One to whom would be given all authority in heaven and on earth. It may be, though, that despite Christ's obscurity Satan was beginning to cast his eye on him with wonder and great concern. We do not know. But it is an extraordinary thing that such a Man lived so long in humble obscurity.

Passages such as that of today show the humble origins of Jesus Christ — but St Luke shows, drawing ultimately on the testimony of the Virgin Mary, that there had been heavenly indications of his greatness during his infancy and youth. Indeed, one such indicator occurred precisely during his years at Nazareth — but the

townspeople did not know about it. This was when he was lost for three days and was found in the Temple. When found, he was discovered “*sitting among the teachers ... and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers*” (Luke 2:46-47). He was also filled with the knowledge that God was his very own Father: “*Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house (or, at my Father’s affairs)*” (1:49). This was the King, the Lord, and the time will come when his reign will be complete and eternal. Let us live for him, then!



Saturday of the seventeenth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 68 (67):6 7, 36 God is in his holy place, God who unites those who dwell in his house; he himself gives might and strength to his people.

Collect O God, protector of those who hope in you, without whom nothing has firm foundation, nothing is holy, bestow in abundance your mercy upon us and grant that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may use the good things that pass in such a way as to hold fast even now to those that ever endure. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 26:11-16.24; Psalm 68;

Matthew 14:1-12

At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the reports about Jesus, and he said to his attendants, This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work in him. Now Herod had

arrested John and bound him and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, for John had been saying to him: It is not lawful for you to have her. Herod wanted to kill John, but he was afraid of the people, because they considered him a prophet. On Herod's birthday the daughter of Herodias danced for them and pleased Herod so much that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. Prompted by her mother, she said, Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist. The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he ordered that her request be granted and had John beheaded in the prison. His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother. John's disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus. (Matthew 14:1-12)

Conscience In Plutarch's account of Alexander the Great, we read of Alexander slaying his friend Clitus. At the feast Alexander put on for his friends, "*some of them started to sing a song making fun of some Macedonians*

who recently had been defeated in a battle with the barbarians.” Clitus objected, at which Alexander joked at Clitus’s complaint. At this, Clitus got to his feet and said, *“Those poor Macedonians you laugh at have, by their wounds fighting for you, made you so great now that you disown your father Philip and call yourself the son of Ammon.”* Alexander was stung at his words, but Clitus persisted. At that, Alexander killed him with a spear. What was the issue? If Plutarch’s account is correct, I contend it was because Alexander’s corrupted conscience could not bear the words of Clitus, and he killed his friend for it. So it has been down the ages. Whatever about the merits of Clitus’s accusation, the incident may stand as an image of the contest, within the domain of Conscience, between might and right. Power has been confronted by Conscience, and Conscience has repeatedly been struck down by Might. So it is in our Gospel passage today (Matthew 14: 1-12). Herod the tetrarch had violated the laws of marriage by taking his brother’s wife, and John the Baptist arrived from Judea to confront the civil ruler. What

mattered to John was God and his holy will. What mattered to Herod was his own convenience and indulgence, powered by Herodias, his wilful, unlawful wife. Did John confront him publicly, and perhaps in the presence of Herodias as well? Perhaps — I think it is probable. Clitus was but a friend of Alexander, and perhaps not much better as a man than his famous friend. But John the Baptist was one of the most moral men of all time — and we have that on the word of Jesus Christ. In hearing John, Herod Antipater was hearing a very holy man who expressed what was the voice of God in both Nature and the revealed Law. He could not bear it. Herodias hated him, and Herod imprisoned him for it. Time and again in human life and in the course of history, the voice of Conscience appears as supreme, while being constantly struck down by the action of Might.

In the contest between the two, John the Baptist lost his life. The issue was the sanctity of marriage and the divine law regarding it. There have been many critical moments in the history of England — and England has

been a critical player in the history of the West, and the West has been critical for the history of the world. One such “moment” was the contest between Thomas a Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, and King Henry II of England. Murdered in 1170 at the instigation of the king, Thomas had persistently confronted the king over his violations of the rights and privileges of the Church. A more critical moment occurred some 350 years later when King Henry VIII assumed, by decree, the visible headship of the Church. This was to circumvent the papal refusal to allow his divorce of Catherine and remarriage, so as to gain an heir. The simple resignation by Sir Thomas More from his office as Chancellor of the Kingdom amounted to a public rejection of the royal claim. This was reinforced by More’s refusal to take the oath required by the First Succession Act. The other celebrity to follow the same path was Bishop John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester and Chancellor of the University of Cambridge — one of the most learned bishops in the world at the time. In 1535 both were tried for treason and executed. It was a confrontation

between self-will and personal convenience, and the testimony of the rightly formed conscience. Conscience was suppressed and its representatives snuffed out. Every human life can be seen in these terms, the contest between a rightly-ordered conscience and a disregard of the moral law as enshrined in Nature and the revealed Law of God. The story of human history can be understood in these terms. Our Gospel today may be viewed from various perspectives, but one is surely that each person is faced with the duty to heed a properly enlightened conscience. This does not mean simply one's own sincere judgment because in the case of a corrupted person, a properly enlightened conscience will probably be impossible, if unaided. Herod Antipater, Henry II, and Henry VIII were not morally equipped to form, unaided, a right moral judgment. They needed the testimony of holy men such as St John the Baptist, St Thomas a Becket and St Thomas More who were themselves guided by God and his Church.

Let us be alive to the supreme issue in life, which is the following before all else of an objectively correct and

properly enlightened conscience. One's so-called "conscience" can so easily be rationalized away into an approval of what are merely one's own preferences. We need to be taught from on high, and this is done especially by divinely authenticated teachers. The Teacher of mankind, divinely authenticated as such, is supremely Jesus Christ. He is present in his body the Church, guiding reason and conscience in its search for the objective Truth. Let us live by a rightly-ordered Conscience. As St Paul writes, *let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 14:1-12)

The influence of the "world" There are three great sources of temptation to sin: the world, the flesh and the devil. Each is powerful, and to resist the influence of each requires fortitude. Often sin involves all three, the devil using both the world and the flesh to tempt us. The "world" refers to the set of temptations and influences coming from outside of us, from the world of persons and

things. The “flesh” refers to those temptations and influences arising from our fallen personal condition. Our Gospel scene today (Matthew 14:1-12) provides us with examples of both, but let us especially notice the influence of the “world”. Herod was “so delighted” at the dancing of Herodias’ daughter *“that he promised on oath to give her anything she asked.”* We notice immediately the influence of his *audience* on Herod. *Thinking of his guests*, Herod wanted to shine before others as one who delighted in such dancing. He succumbed to human respect. When the girl asked for John the Baptist’s head he had no fortitude to resist this worldly influence. *“The king was distressed, but, thinking of the oaths he had sworn and of his guests, he ordered it to be given her”*. Herod showed himself to be weak in the face of this influence, and so he committed a most grievous sin.

Let us resolve to practise the virtue of fortitude in the face of the influence of the “world”.



Eighteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 70 (69):2, 6 O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me! You are my rescuer, my help; O Lord, do not delay.

Collect Draw near to your servants, O Lord, and answer their prayers with unceasing kindness, that, for those who glory in you as their Creator and guide, you may restore what you have created and keep safe what you have restored. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 55:1-3; Psalm 144;

Romans 8:35.37-39; Matthew 14:13-21

When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick. As evening approached, the

disciples came to him and said, This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so that they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food. Jesus replied, They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat. We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish, they answered. Bring them here to me, he said. And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children. (Matthew 14:13-21)

Power and compassion There were at least two incidents in the public ministry of our Lord that involved the feeding of a multitude of people with a mere handful of food. In our Gospel passage today from St Matthew, Christ departed by boat to a desert place after hearing of

the martyrdom of John the Baptist at the hands of Herod Antipater. The people followed him and he “*was moved with compassion toward them and healed their sick.*” At evening, with five loaves and two fish, he fed a multitude of “*about five thousand men apart from women and children.*” Twelve baskets of scraps were gathered up. In the following chapter (Matthew 15:32-39), our Lord went up the mountain, sat down, and great multitudes came to him, bringing the sick. Once again Jesus had compassion on the multitude, took “*seven loaves and a few fish,*” and fed four thousand men, apart from women and children. Seven baskets full of left-overs were gathered. Both incidents showed forth Christ’s compassion for the crowds in need, and his great power. Mark, like Matthew, narrates both miracles, the second being given in chapter 8:1-9. The other two Gospels report the first miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, but not the second. Mark’s account of the feeding of the five thousand (6:31-44) places it after our Lord receives news of John the Baptist’s death (as in Matthew), and his general account of it is

similar to that of Matthew. In the Gospel of St John, this miracle does not especially follow the martyrdom of St John, though it does follow our Lord's crossing the Lake, as is the case in Matthew and Mark. In John's Gospel, Jesus goes up a mountain (6:3), whereas this detail is not in Matthew and Mark. While Matthew and Mark narrate the incident as one of the miracles of Jesus Christ which show forth his compassion and divine power, only this time involving a multitude of people, St John dwells on its deeper meanings. Christ is the *new Moses*. The loaves and fishes are a *new manna*. It all points to a *new Passover*. Specifically, it bespeaks the Bread from heaven which is Jesus himself, given to us to be our food and drink in the Eucharist. Perhaps the incident was also reminiscent of Elisha, who fed 100 men with 20 loaves of bread in 2 Kings 4:42-44. Elisha followed Elijah, just as Christ followed the Baptist.

The modern age tends to dismiss miracles as being of little import. This is because they are assumed to be little more than fanciful legend. For some time, the prevailing

assumption among various scholars of the New Testament was that the miracles of Scripture were somewhat of a phantom. But this is, of course, a gratuitous assumption. Our miracle today was plainly a vivid memory for the Evangelists and the early Church. There have also been those who reduce the second miracle of the feeding of the four thousand to a mere repetition of the same incident. But this cannot be the case because in Mark our Lord, on a separate occasion, specifically refers to the two incidents. *“When I broke the five loaves among five thousand, how many baskets full of fragments did you gather up?” The disciples replied, “Twelve.” “And when I broke the seven among four thousand, how many baskets full of fragments did you gather?” And they said, “Seven.” “And He said to them, ‘How is it that you do not understand?’”* (Mark 8:18-21). In this particular text, Christ himself gives an interpretation of the meaning of the miracle (without excluding other meanings): it warned against the leaven of the Pharisees. This was their doctrine, which was opposed to the teaching of Jesus. This was not quite the meaning

given to it by John in his account, though not, of course, opposed to it. Whatever about these various meanings, it was a great miracle and manifested yet again the boundless power of Jesus Christ. Christ was capable of doing any good thing, and effortlessly so. The miracles of Jesus Christ are of various kinds. He heals the sick, and can deal with any kind of sickness — epilepsy, loss of speech, blindness, deafness, paralysis, even death itself. He can raise from the dead. He is master of the netherworld, and the powers of hell are helpless before him. He has full power over the elements — he can walk on the turgid sea and reduce a raging storm to absolute calm. He can even feed the multitudes at a word, and with virtually nothing at hand — a mere five loaves and two fishes. Wonder of wonders! He can even raise *himself* from the dead, and can *predict* that he will do so, and to the *very day*.

Christ's greatest "miracle," if we wish to call it this, was his taking away the sin of the world. This was a labour of gigantic proportions, and by divine plan it crushed him. He freely consented to the crushing, for it

was the appointed way to attain the redemption of the world. He had to suffer if he was to enter his glory, and his entry to glory opened up the path to glory for the rest of mankind. This was the work of the Messiah, and the greatest manifestation of his power, his strength and his authority. All other miracles pointed to what would be his greatest work, the redemption of mankind. Let us go to Jesus Christ, then, and take our shelter under him. He is our true Friend.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 14:13-21)

Gathering with Jesus at Sunday Mass We contemplate our Lord in today's Gospel scene, with the large crowd before him. He moves among them as the centre and soul of the multitude. Let us think of all mankind and the calling that all have received to come to Jesus and to find life in him. We are called to live in union with Christ as a great family, not simply as individuals. Of course, each of us stands before God as an individual. I am

responsible for how I stand before God and how I live in his presence. But I stand before God not as one isolated from others, but as a member of a great and vast family, the family of God. Let us, then, look on that Gospel scene as symbolic of our human position. We too are in that crowd. We come before God together. We go to heaven with others. In God's plan we go on our journey with others. At our baptism we are received into the community of the Church. We become members of a family. Most especially, the high point of our Christian life and its very source is the celebration of the Eucharist. The Eucharist is not simply a personal matter, between me and Jesus Christ who is the holy Eucharist. No, for we gather precisely as a parish family each Sunday, in union with the great family of the universal Church. The whole Church celebrates the Lord's Day together around the Eucharist. Just as our Lord gathered around him the vast crowds and fed them, so too at Sunday Mass our Lord gathers us all together around him so as to feed us with his body and blood which was offered up for our salvation and sanctification. Throughout

the universal Church it is especially on each Sunday that there is repeated what happened in today's Gospel. Christ gathers the multitudes to him to feed them — but now with himself. So then, with today's Gospel in mind, let us think of Sunday. Pope Benedict XVI repeatedly stressed the importance of the Sunday observance in the life of the Church. What a difference it would make to our individual religious life, to the spiritual life of the parish and to the universal Church, were *all* of Christ's faithful to observe Sunday truly as the Lord's Day!

What a difference it would make were we to put our whole self into the prayerful and reverent celebration of Sunday Mass! Imagine everyone, the whole parish, approaching the Sacrament of Reconciliation frequently, in order to participate in Mass and receive our Lord in Holy Communion more perfectly and in a greater state of grace! Imagine the whole parish going away from Sunday Mass with the thought that we, all of us, have received our Lord in Holy Communion, perhaps after having spent some minutes in thanksgiving after Mass. Imagine then trying in

some way to make the rest of Sunday the Lord's Day, and refraining from unnecessary work and renewing one's personal and family life for the week ahead. Then very importantly, what a difference it would make to the life of the parish if everyone who comes to Mass were to make a personal apostolate of drawing to Mass those whom they know do not come to Sunday Mass. Mass is the centre and source of all. The spread of this truth from person to person is an apostolate in itself. As we think of our Lord in the Gospel gathering the crowds and feeding them, let us think of our Lord gathering the family of God around him, especially at Sunday Mass. Let us make it our business to bring others into this weekly event, the summit and source of our Christian life.

Further Reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* no.1878-1885 (The communitarian character of the human vocation)



Monday of the eighteenth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 70 (69):2, 6 O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me! You are my rescuer, my help; O Lord, do not delay.

Collect Draw near to your servants, O Lord, and answer their prayers with unceasing kindness, that, for those who glory in you as their Creator and guide, you may restore what you have created and keep safe what you have restored. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 28:1-17; Psalm 118;
Matthew 14:22-36 (used in Year A)

Jesus made the disciples get into a boat and precede him to the other side of the sea, while he dismissed the crowds. After doing so, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When it was evening he was there alone. Meanwhile the boat, already a few miles offshore, was

being tossed about by the waves, for the wind was against it. During the fourth watch of the night, he came toward them, walking on the sea. When the disciples saw him walking on the sea they were terrified. "It is a ghost," they said, and they cried out in fear. At once Jesus spoke to them, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." Peter said to him in reply, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw how strong the wind was he became frightened; and, beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand and caught him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" After they got into the boat, the wind died down. Those who were in the boat did him homage, saying, "Truly, you are the Son of God." After making the crossing, they came to land at Gennesaret. When the men of that place recognized him, they sent word to all the surrounding country. People brought to him all those who were sick and begged him that they might touch only the

tassel on his cloak, and as many as touched it were healed.
(Matthew 14:22-36)

God's will Let us notice one word in this passage, a word from which everything else in the passage flows. The word is “made”. Jesus “made” the disciples embark and go ahead. The incidents being described here follow immediately on the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand with the five loaves and two fishes. In his Gospel (John 6: 14-15), St John tells us that this miracle was a sensation. The crowds began to speak of Jesus as the prophet who was to come into the world, and our Lord could see that they would try to acclaim him as king. Our text from Matthew does not mention this, except that our Lord, once the miracle was over, immediately (*eutheōs*) made his disciples enter their boat and leave for the other side. Mark in his Gospel tells us the same (6:45 — *euthus*). Let us note here, though, that Jesus “made” them go. The word Matthew uses to express our Lord’s directive is “*ēnagkazen*” — it means “constrained” or “compelled” — a strong form of command. Mark uses the

same word, in the same tense: Jesus “made” the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead. So they had no choice, they were told to go. In St John’s account things are narrated a little differently. Jesus withdrew to a mountain to pray, and at evening the disciples got into their boat to cross the Lake for Capernaum (6:15-17). So presumably it was evening by the time the feeding of the crowds was over, and while our Lord went up the mountain, at his instruction the disciples left for Capernaum. The detail I wish to highlight is that both Matthew and Mark state that the disciples left our Lord and headed out on the Lake *at his specific and strong command*. So out they went, on their own — and *got into enormous difficulties*. The accounts of both Matthew and Mark are closely parallel. Both tell us that the boat was in the midst of the sea, while Jesus was far away on the mountain in prayer. Matthew writes that the boat was “*being distressed (basanizomenon) by the waves for the wind was contrary,*” while Mark tells us that Jesus “*seeing them distressed (autous basanizomenous) in the rowing, for the wind was*

contrary,” came to them. Both tell us that it was about the fourth watch of the night. St John tells us that it was “a great wind,” and they were about twenty-five or thirty furlongs out in the Lake (John 6:18-19). Now, they found themselves in all this *because of Jesus’ command*.

On an earlier occasion in Matthew’s Gospel (8: 25), the disciples found themselves in the midst of a terrible storm in the Lake, but then they had Jesus with them. Fishermen that they were, they could see that they were in mortal danger — and Jesus was asleep in the boat, exhausted by his unremitting ministry. They forcibly awoke him, pleading that he do something — and at a word he reduced the raging storm to a silent calm. But this time (Matthew 14: 22-36) they were on their own and they were in their predicament precisely because of the command of our Lord. He had “constrained” them to go on ahead, without him. This is surely a lesson for all disciples of Jesus Christ, and indeed for all the children of God who are intent on doing the will of their Father in heaven. The will of God can be manifest in a variety of ways: the

requirements of our situation or calling in life, the legitimate commands of superiors, even the impositions of unjust persons — all these situations can indicate what it is that God permits or wants of us, and they can involve immense difficulty. It is commonly said that suffering and evil constitute the greatest obstacle to faith in God. It is “the problem of evil.” People abandon God and faith in his revelation precisely because of the sufferings they are required by life’s course to undergo. How could a good God permit this? There is no doubt that suffering and difficulty can have this effect, but what was the upshot of the difficulties into which the disciples found themselves, precisely because of what our Lord commanded them to do? The final upshot was a greater faith and a greater appropriation of divine revelation. The entire, ugly incident resulted in Christ coming to them across the water and their perceiving with even greater clarity who he was: *“Truly you are the Son of God!”* Of course, this greater faith was occasioned by the miracle of our Lord coming to them across the water amid the turgid waves. The point to

notice, though, is that the general result of their difficulties was their attainment, in a greater measure, of the principal goal of life. That goal is faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Christ sent them into difficulties, but he had a plan for them that surpassed all the difficulties. So it is with each of us. So we should trust him.

God places us in this world and each of us has a course ahead with all the difficulties that this will involve. We are in the hands of God. The one thing necessary is that we do what the disciples did when our Lord commanded them to leave — we must do what God wants, whatever be the difficulties that may follow. Those difficulties will, in God's plan, have their place in his plan. Let us always trust him. He will lead us on. If we suffer with Christ we shall reign with him. If we die with him we shall rise with him. As he said to his disciples, "*Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.*" Let us take our stand with him, and ultimately all will be well.

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Second reflection:

Christian contentment In the book of Numbers, the children of Israel are complaining about the lack of variety. All they get from heaven is manna! They think back complainingly of what they used to eat when in Egypt. They are on their way from slavery to the promised land, and are being nourished by God from heaven with manna — but they are still not satisfied. Let us examine ourselves. There is an old saying that the other pastures always seem to be greener. We are on our way to the promised land of heaven, with much to look forward to and yet do we not, for much of our lives, complain? In the case of the Hebrews, God was not pleased with their complaining: “*Moses heard the people wailing, every family at the door of its tent. The anger of the Lord flared out*” (Numbers 12). St Paul referred at various times to the sufferings he had to endure, but he also said that he had learnt to be content.

Let us strive to find joy in the discontent that must of necessity characterise this vale of tears. Our Lord said, *“Come to me all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest ... for my yoke is easy and my burden light.”* God means us to find joy in our everyday life, whatever be our sufferings. It is the joy of doing his will and of being in communion with him.



Tuesday of the eighteenth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 70 (69):2, 6 O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me! You are my rescuer, my help; O Lord, do not delay.

Collect Draw near to your servants, O Lord, and answer their prayers with unceasing kindness, that, for those who glory in you as their Creator and guide, you may restore what you have created and keep safe what you have restored. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 30:1-2.12-15.18-22; Psalm 101;
Matthew 15:1-2.10-14 (Year A)

Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat! Jesus called the crowd to him and said, Listen and understand. What goes into a man's

mouth does not make him 'unclean', but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean'. Then the disciples came to him and asked, Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this? He replied, Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit. (Matthew 15:1-2.10-14 Year A)

God must plant St. John Henry Newman's *Apologia pro Vita Sua* came out in 1864. Not only did it demolish the original accusation that occasioned it (Kingsley's insinuation that Newman and Catholics are duplicitous), but it contributed towards the moral and intellectual respectability of Catholicism. Not long after its publication there appeared in the Frazer Magazine an attack on the *Apologia* by Fitzjames Stephen, the prominent agnostic lawyer and (later) judge. Then some years later the same Stephen published an attack on Newman's later volume, his greatest philosophical work — *A Grammar of Assent*. To Stephen's frustration, Newman

refused to notice these attacks publicly, and certainly did not bother to answer them. While Newman's two aforesaid works remain classics, Stephen's critiques of them have long been forgotten. Not only did Newman think that Stephen misrepresented his position in so many ways that it was not worth trying to answer, but that Stephen's starting points, the first principles of his thinking, were so profoundly at variance with Newman's own, that a true discussion of the matters at issue was impossible. This touches on one of Newman's contributions to the modern philosophy of knowledge. He insisted on the overriding importance of first principles, an importance greater than the thinking that follows on those first principles. He went on to say that debate on an issue is virtually pointless if first principles are impossibly divergent. Such was the case, he believed, between himself and the likes of the agnostic Fitzjames Stephen. He made several further points about the first principles or basic starting points of thought. Among them were especially two. Firstly, one's basic assumptions are not just an intellectual matter. They

flow from one's moral character and position. They manifest a particular moral preference, inclination and stance. In basic matters, one's thought manifests one's moral stand. Further, one's basic principles can be hidden from sight, be it one's own sight or that of others. The beginnings of one's thought can be lost from view and hence beyond one's direct control. They are obscurely connected with one's moral and spiritual position. How, then, can one gain the correct starting points? It is possible by asking God to grant them by his grace.

In our Gospel scene today our Lord is in the midst of his ministry in the Galilean region (he has just been to Gennesaret) and “*some Pharisees and teachers of the law from Jerusalem*” come to him. Of course, they regard themselves as the authorities on religious observance in the nation, and they quickly notice things which the disciples of Jesus were not doing. To begin with, the disciples fail to observe the established practices of ritual purity — they “*do not wash their hands before they eat.*” There were, of course, extensive stipulations in the Pentateuch on

cleanliness in various situations of life, giving to such practices a religious dimension. This was interpreted by the religious leaders in their own fashion, and greatly extended to other areas of daily life. Their objection to what they saw in the behaviour of Christ's disciples related not just to religious observance. It also related to their own position in the religious life of the nation. Their influence over the society depended on the religious acceptance of these teachings, and here was the famous young Rabbi of Galilee whom so many took to be a great prophet, disregarding it all. When Pilate received Christ to pronounce judgment on him, he could see that it was simply "envy" that led the religious leaders to hand him over for a death sentence. They *envied* his moral supremacy and authority as a teacher of the things of God. This, together with other causes of their blindness, was where they were coming from. They had basic first principles, starting points, fundamental assumptions that led them into a profound and implacable divergence from the Person and teaching of the Son of God made man.

What does our Lord say to the crowds about the criticism of the scribes and Pharisees? He states a general principle that they had forgotten. *“What goes into a man’s mouth does not make him ‘unclean’, but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him ‘unclean’.”* That is to say, what you think, say and do is what constitutes sinful uncleanness. What matters is what “comes out” of you, and this depends on the state of your heart. It is your moral condition which will make you “clean” or “unclean.”

Even more fundamentally, what is needed is for God himself, by his grace, to plant the foundations of your mind, heart, soul and life. *“Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit.”* Our Lord’s opponents were blind. Their life did not have God’s action as its beginning. God did not do the planting in their case, so they were in the darkness, and bore bad fruit. Their starting points did not come from God, but from elsewhere, from sin and Self. The answer is to turn to God and ask

that he, the sovereign Lord of all, plant the right starting points, the true first principles. As St Paul writes, “*let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.*” Let us earnestly ask God to give to us the true foundation, which is Christ.

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Second reflection:

Humility In the Book of Numbers, the people of Israel travel through the wilderness on their way to the promised land. The journey is dominated by the figure of Moses whom the Lord God chose to draw into a remarkable intimacy with him. There was a very special directness in this relationship which marked Moses off from other prophets. God says that “*If any man among you is a prophet I make myself known to him in a vision, I speak to him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses.... I speak with him face to face*” (Numbers ch.12). Moses was great in a variety of ways, but our passage today points

out a very notable feature about him: he was particularly humble. Coupled with this, he loved those in difficulty and interceded earnestly for them before God. Let us note, though, his striking humility: he was “*the most humble of men.*” This, of course, points to Christ who is the pre-eminent exemplar of humility, another and far greater Moses.

The spiritual masters teach that humility is the foundation of the spiritual life. Without it, then, the house is built on sand. Let us work on advancing daily in humility, with the grace of God as our stay. The same masters teach that we will advance in humility if, for love of Jesus, we accept being humiliated and placed in the lower position. In all this — as has been said — Christ is our great model, and the source of the grace to achieve it.



Wednesday of the eighteenth week of Ordinary Time

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Collect Draw near to your servants, O Lord, and answer their prayers with unceasing kindness, that, for those who glory in you as their Creator and guide, you may restore what you have created and keep safe what you have restored. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 31:1-7; (Psalm:) Jeremiah 31;
Matthew 15:21-28

Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession. Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples

came to him and urged him, Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us. He answered, I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. The woman came and knelt before him. Lord, help me! she said. He replied, It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs. Yes, Lord, she said, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table. Then Jesus answered, Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted. And her daughter was healed from that very hour. (Matthew 15:21-28)

Mercy The most frustrating thing about the proposition that there is a God, is that man can't see him. He is not evident to us. Interestingly, Blessed John Henry Newman came close to saying that there is a sense in which he is evident to us — evident through the voice and intimations of the conscience. The intimations of conscience, he thought, are much closer to us than are our perceptions of the external world. It is within our sense of duty we are able to have a dim awareness of the transcendent moral Obliger who is God. Even so, this

sense of a transcendent Obliger would seem not to be simply self-evident. It is (perhaps) the fruit of an implicit rational reflection. Be that as it may, the point here is that God is not directly seen, heard, touched. In other words, most would think, he is distant — or so it would seem in the first instance. God, if he exists, is somewhere, but not near at hand (because he is not seen). This apparent distance from God tends to give man the impression that if there is a God, then he does not care very much about us. In many traditional and primal religions, the highest god performs his business of setting the world in motion. Then he withdraws to his own repose or private interests. Man is left to deal with lesser deities who have certain powers but who, like the high god himself, are not particularly good and moral beings anyway. The abode of the gods (heaven) is not a particularly admirable place. The upshot of it all is that man tends to be left in his plight without a lot of hope. He can (and does, in the religions of man) raise a lot of noise with his sacrifices and prayers to get the gods moving on his behalf, but not a lot can be expected. All up, man is

in a painful situation, very subject to the vagaries of war, pestilence, floods and fire, and all else that leaves him like flotsam tossed about by the cruel sea. He cries out for mercy, pity, aid, relief. These pleas, in large measure, power his religious life and it is unremitting. He looks above for something beyond the clouds to come down and fix things for him, because nothing at hand around him answers to his need. From his heart man yearns not for a god who is somewhat more powerful than he, but for a God of boundless power and limitless mercy. It is mercy he yearns for, and the cry for mercy arises from all, chosen people and Gentile alike.

Yes, mercy is the cry of mankind, be they the chosen people of God, or the Gentile peoples. Our Gospel passage today (Matthew 15: 21-28) presents us with the Gentile cry for mercy, directed to the Son of David. Jesus has temporarily withdrawn from the land of the fathers and has gone *incognito* into Gentile territory. But *incognito* or not, he is quickly discovered by one who is desperate for divine aid. It suggests, incidentally, that however hidden God

may be, the one who truly yearns for him will find him. But there he was, the Saviour being loudly announced by someone who had to have mercy shown her — her beloved daughter was in the clutches of the underworld. There was to be no refusal as far as she was concerned. Mercy, mercy, mercy was her shout. The Greek is direct: She shouted out: *ekrazen, ekrazen*. Her cry was, *Have mercy on me: eleeson me*. This, I would suggest, is the cry of mankind, and the driving force of much of religion. If man can be described as a “religious” animal, and not just a rational one, the wellsprings of his religion are his vulnerability to attack from around, within, below and above him. He is prone to death and to misery, and he needs mercy from wherever it may be found. For the Canaanite woman, it was a stroke of unbelievably good fortune that the Son of David had unaccountably arrived in their midst. There was no doubt about him, as far as she was concerned — whereas there was plenty of doubt about the efficacy of her religion and her deities. So she went after him with her plea for mercy, and mercy she received.

But notice our Lord's initially stony response to her. It too spoke of mercy. Get rid of her, our Lord's disciples were pleading. She is bothersome — grant her request and send her off. What did our Lord say? "*I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.*" Mercy was the mission entrusted to him by the Father of mercies, by the God of all comfort, by him who is rich in mercy. He had come down from heaven to seek out *the lost sheep*. The divine bent was towards those in profound need, whether they knew it or not. It was precisely for those who were lost and who had strayed from the almighty care of the Father of all, that he had come.

The plea of the pagan woman for mercy was the plea of the two blind men (Matthew 9:27), of the man in the crowd who pleaded mercy for his son (Matthew 17:15) and of the two blind men at Jericho (Matthew 20:29). At the beginning of the celebration of every Mass, both celebrant and faithful use the prayer of the Canaanite woman in appealing for mercy: Lord have mercy! The greatest of mercies is redemption from the malady of sin and being

drawn into friendship with God. God's mercy not only delivers man from many temporal miseries, but more importantly, it takes him to heaven. Let us make Mercy our plea, taking to heart the magnificent prayer of the pagan woman of today's Gospel.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 15:21-28)

“Son of David, take pity on me. My daughter is tormented by a devil.” Consider the Canaanite woman who pursued our Lord to plead that he drive out the devil afflicting her daughter. She did not have the faith of the Hebrews. She did not live her life according to what God had revealed to Moses and the prophets. Just what her religious beliefs were we have no way of knowing, but she did believe in the goodness of Jesus and his power over the demons. Her very persistence with Jesus shows this. She knew he would be patient with her, compassionate, and that he could do what she was asking of him. Jesus tested her faith and loved her for the faith she showed:

“Woman, you have great faith. Let your wish be granted.”

Every day we associate with people who hardly know Christ at all. They do not share our faith, and they are in various levels of need. They have no one to turn to. Let us speak to them of Christ if there is the opportunity, pointing to him as one who is all powerful. Who knows! They may turn to him in their need as did the Canaanite woman. She learnt of Jesus from someone. It may be God’s plan to hear their prayer, as did our Lord the prayer of the Canaanite woman. God will be glorified and perhaps such a person may find faith in our Lord, if they are helped to turn to him in their need.

The problem so often is that we ourselves do not have sufficient faith in our Lord to speak to others of him and of his love and power — especially to those who do not know him at all. There are a lot of people who are in need out there in the world. Christ is the answer to their need.



Thursday of the eighteenth week of Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 50;

Matthew 16:13-23

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, Who do people say the Son of Man is? They replied, Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. But what about you? he asked. Who do you say I am?

Simon Peter answered, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus replied, Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. Never, Lord! he said. This shall never happen to you! Jesus turned and said to Peter, Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men. (Matthew 16:13-23)

The Rock

As is well known, the Catholic Church does not base its formal and binding teaching on Scriptural texts alone. For instance, the mere fact that in the sixth chapter of the Gospel of St John, Christ publicly declares that “*my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink*” and that “*whoever eats me will live because of me*” (John 6:55-57), is not the only determiner of the Catholic dogma on the Eucharist. Just as important is the Church’s formal Tradition on the point. The Church has always, from its beginning (prior to the writings of the New Testament), taught its doctrine on the Eucharist. The testimony of the Gospels — which writings postdate the commencement of the Church’s Tradition — is the inspired written expression of this. The Church knows what Christ meant to teach and the Church has always known it, for it is an essential part of her Tradition. It was out of this Tradition that the inspired Gospels came. Thus the faithful, with the Scriptures in hand, read the inspired word with the mind of the Church, which is to say within the Church’s Tradition. That Tradition is itself the fruit of the

guidance of the Spirit of God through the centuries of the Church's life. However, I have at times heard it said that because it is the *defined teaching* of the Church which authoritatively determines what doctrines are divinely revealed, therefore *particular Scriptural passages* cannot be taken as necessarily being expressions of those defined doctrines. That is to say, while the Catholic knows that Christ taught the doctrine of the Eucharist because the Church has declared this to be a point of divine faith, he cannot point to particular Gospel texts as necessarily expressing that very doctrine. Now this is a misunderstanding. The Church has left a wide space for the private judgment of readers of the Scriptures, provided they read within the life and tradition of the Church. However, on some texts the Church has formally pronounced their true meaning. Our subject here is not the doctrine of the Eucharist, but this text of the Gospel of St Matthew today. It is a pivotal text and it tells of the founding of Christ's Church. Here, Christ goes beyond his preaching on the Kingdom, to announce that he will build

his Church. Further, he will build it on Simon, his visible Rock.

The point here is not just the plain meaning of this inspired text (Matthew 16:13-23), accessible to the private judgment of the reader. That plain meaning is that Christ intends to build his Church. Access to the Kingdom, about which he has been so relentlessly preaching, is available through his Church. To enter the Kingdom, one enters the Church he will build. Where is this Church? It is where Peter is, because Christ built it on Simon, its Rock. *“You are Peter (su ei Petros), and on this Rock (petra) I will build my Church... I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven...”* The meaning is plain. But this is not the only reason why the faithful may know with certitude the objective meaning of this pivotal text. The fact is that the Church has formally declared its meaning in an Ecumenical Council: the First Vatican Council of 1869-1870. That is to say, the Church has declared that the obvious meaning of this Gospel text is indeed part of the Tradition of the Church. One need not simply rely on

private judgment to know what the text objectively means. One can count on the formal, divinely-guided Tradition of the Church, not only to know the actual doctrine of Christ on the Church and on the place of Peter in it, but also to know the meaning of this particular Gospel text on the matter. The Church has not taken this step of formally pronouncing on a particular Gospel text in a lot of cases — but she has done so in some. Our Gospel text today is one such. Where does the Church make this declaration? The First Vatican Council began in 1869, and its fourth Session was held in the following year, 1870. That session proclaimed the First Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ on 18 July 1870. In Chapter 1 of this Constitution on the Church, our Gospel passage today is quoted. Its meaning is declared to be “*absolutely manifest*” and always understood by the Catholic Church. It then states that if anyone says that Peter the Apostle was not appointed by Christ to be head of all the Apostles and visible head of the whole Church, and that he was granted true jurisdiction over the Church, *let him be anathema*.

What I am saying is that it is possible to know the objective meaning of *some* particular texts of the Gospels with certitude, and this meaning *at times* is stipulated in Catholic teaching. In such a case, Tradition declares on the meaning of certain Gospel texts.

Our Gospel text today is a key text in the Gospel of St Matthew. Christ passes from the Kingdom to the Church and points to the Church as his own creation. The Church will be the locale and bearer of the Kingdom, and in the Church will be found the keys to enter that Kingdom. He entrusts the keys to Simon whom he declares to be the Church's visible Rock, the visible vicar or representative of himself who is the unseen Rock of the Church. The Twelve share with Simon the holding of the keys, but it is Simon above all to whom they are entrusted. He is Peter, and those keys are passed on to his successors, with whom all Christ's disciples are called to be in communion. Let us ponder at length on Christ's words in today's Gospel.

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Second reflection:

Faith The power to judge and make judgments is man's glory. But in religion, there is the temptation to make our own private judgment the foundation of living according to what God has revealed. This was what was behind Cardinal Newman's statement that the essence of religion is authority and obedience: in religion we live in obedience to God's authority. In the book of Numbers, Moses was ordered by God to answer the people's demand for water by ordering the rock to give water: "*in full view of them, order this rock to give water. You will make water flow for them out of the rock*" (Numbers ch. 20). But Moses, when the moment came, doubted God's word, and interposed his own judgment: he "*raised his hand and struck the rock twice with the branch*". He did not believe as he should have, and acted according to his own judgment to help the process along. He acted not on faith but on his own private judgment. For his lack of faith he was punished with not being allowed to enter the Promised Land.

Let us resolve to live by faith in what God has revealed as it comes to us through and in the Church's teaching — and not just by private judgment and by sight.



Friday of the eighteenth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 70 (69):2, 6 O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me! You are my rescuer, my help; O Lord, do not delay.

Collect Draw near to your servants, O Lord, and answer their prayers with unceasing kindness, that, for those who glory in you as their Creator and guide, you may restore what you have created and keep safe what you have restored. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Nahum 2:1-3; 3: 1-3.6-7; (Ps:) Deut 32;
Matthew 16:24-28

Then Jesus said to his disciples, If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits

his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done. I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. (Matthew 16:24-28)

The Cross There are various understandings and assessments of classic Buddhism. From the perspective of the Christian, there is no doubt that Siddhartha Gautama (the “Supreme Buddha”) grasped genuine features of the truth of things, which we have no time or space to go into just here. For instance, he strove to pursue a path of moderation away from the extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification — and other things could be mentioned. The general popularity of the Dalai Lama in the West is one evidence of the positive and several truly valid features of Buddhism, especially its emphasis on ethics and understanding. On the seriously debit side, it would seem that classic Buddhism, in theory at least, does not allow for

a loving Creator. Let us simply observe one obvious thing. As is well known, Gautama, after some 49 days of meditation under the Bodhi tree (at the age of 35) attained “Enlightenment”. Thenceforth he was known as the Awakened or Enlightened One — the “Buddha.” Importantly, he had gained a full insight into the cause of suffering and of the steps needed to eliminate it. These discoveries became known as the Four Noble Truths, and it is through the mastery of these truths that Nirvana, or a state of liberation, is possible. Let us leave Buddha at that point and simply observe that the avoidance of suffering and “evil” was the motive of Gautama’s search and his eventual message. Suffering was the black hole of human life, the source and locale of meaninglessness. It simply had to be avoided and eliminated, and Gautama is deemed by his vast numbers of disciples to have found the answer. What, though, is the “motive” of the intervention of the God of the Judeo-Christian revelation? It is not “suffering” primarily and as such, but something immeasurably worse: *sin*. *Sin* is the true ogre of life, and it is sin which is at the

root of suffering and evil. It entered the world through the rebellion of the first man and woman — prompted by the Angel of rebellion — and the entire cosmos was dislocated as a result. Man fell in his nature and was rendered estranged from his loving Creator. The task ahead was redemption — not just from suffering but from the evil of sinful rebellion.

I say this to introduce the surprising turn-about which Jesus Christ effected in regard to the intractable problem of suffering — and Gautama has been mentioned simply to illustrate how perennial and how much of a stumbling block human suffering is. Christ took the stage in order to do something absolutely original, though prefigured and hinted at in the prophecies before him. He arrived as the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. This was to be done precisely by his *obedient suffering*. His witness to the truth (about himself) would bring down upon his shoulders unheard of suffering, and this would be accepted by him in atonement for the sin of the world. This was the divine plan, and Jesus Christ did the great

work. It was necessary, according to the divine plan, that he suffer and so enter his glory. His obedient suffering opened for us the gates of heaven. Now, apart from the dazzling benefit for mankind that this salvation from sin effected, it also transformed human suffering. It by no means took it away, but it transformed its meaning. Gautama and so many others since have, perhaps validly, seen suffering as the great stumbling block of human life. Seeing this, he thought that it has to be avoided, or eliminated, or eluded. It is essentially an ogre. What Jesus Christ did was to make of it a path to glory, provided, of course, it is *obedient* suffering. It must be suffering according to the divine will. If it is accepted, or even chosen, because it seems to be what our loving Creator (of whom Buddha was unaware or rejected) wills, then it is the seed-bed of most abundant life. The Christian who loves Jesus Christ and who follows him as the Object of revealed religion, will not look on suffering and death as the dark end, but as the sure beginning and the path-way to abundant life. Jesus Christ is *the Way, the Truth and the*

Life, and this has overflowing implications for suffering. So it is that our Lord says in today's Gospel that "*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it*" (Matthew 16: 24-28). Because of Christ, God acts now through suffering.

This is not to say that the Christian breezily walks into suffering — absolutely not! His own nature which recoils from suffering is also the voice of God because God is the loving Creator of his human nature. But if the suffering ahead of him is allowed, disposed or willed by God because of circumstances or the call of duty — if it is a matter of obedience that we suffer — then that suffering will be life-giving. If by grace and our own intent we suffer in union with the suffering Christ, that suffering will be the occasion and path to abundant life, which is what Jesus Christ came to give to us. Indeed, the highest step in the active and loving following of Christ is to choose with him the Cross which he places on our shoulders. Let us

ask for the grace, then, to view the Cross of suffering as he viewed it — which is to say, as St Paul puts it, that the mind of Jesus Christ be in us!

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Second reflection: (Matthew 16:24-28)

“If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself”

Our Lord insists with his disciples that there is one lesson they must learn: if anyone wishes to follow him, “*let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me*”. There is no way of avoiding of difficulty and suffering in the doing of God’s will each day. Various saints and spiritual masters have also insisted that the best crosses to be taken up are the hidden and interior ones, those that are connected with cultivating the virtues of the heart. Our Lord tells us that we are to learn of him, for he is “*meek and humble of heart*”. There we immediately have an immense and daily cross ahead of us.

That cross is the daily denial of all within us that is pride and self-centred anger, and the constant cultivation of interior humility and meekness. There are numerous battles to be waged within, out of the sight of all except God who sees all.

God will be watching our efforts to be like Jesus in mind and heart. He will support by his grace all we do to carry the daily cross that is involved in doing this. Let us examine ourselves and resolve to do our work in life in a way that is informed by prayer and a Christ-like spirit of self-denial.



Saturday of the eighteenth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 70 (69):2, 6 O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me! You are my rescuer, my help; O Lord, do not delay.

Collect Draw near to your servants, O Lord, and answer their prayers with unceasing kindness, that, for those who glory in you as their Creator and guide, you may restore what you have created and keep safe what you have restored. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Habakkuk 1:12-2:4; Psalm 9;
Matthew 17:14-20

When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. Lord, have mercy on my son, he said. He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him. O unbelieving and

perverse generation, Jesus replied, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me. Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed from that moment. Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, Why couldn't we drive it out? He replied, Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you. (Matthew 17:14-20)

Mercy Saint Catherine of Genoa (Italy), was born in 1447 and died on 15 September, 1510. During the course of her holy life she received wonderful communications from God, of which she spoke at times to those around her, but which are mainly embodied in her two celebrated works: the *Dialogues of the Soul and Body*, and the *Treatise on Purgatory*. She was beatified in 1675 by Clement X, and canonized in 1737 by Clement XII. Meantime, her writings had been examined by the Holy Office and pronounced to contain doctrine that would be

enough, in itself, to prove her sanctity. Consider one page in her *Treatise on Purgatory*. In chapter VIII of that work she writes, “*I see that as far as God is concerned, Paradise has no gates, but he who will may enter. For God is all mercy, and his open arms are ever extended to receive us into his glory. But I see that the Divine Essence is so pure — purer than the imagination can conceive — that the soul, finding in itself the slightest imperfection, would rather cast itself into a thousand hells than appear, so stained, in the presence of the Divine Majesty. Knowing, then, that Purgatory was intended for her cleansing, she throws herself therein, and finds there that great mercy, the removal of her stains.*” As to Hell, she has this to say in the previous chapter: “*As the purified spirit finds no repose but in God, for whom it was created, so the soul in sin can rest nowhere but in Hell, which by reason of its sins, has become its end.*” Catherine is referring to the soul that “*has parted from the body in mortal sin*”. The point to be noticed here is that God is described by her as pure and holy mercy, and the justice of God is expressed in what the

soul will naturally do upon leaving this life. If sullied by sin it will not bear being in the all-holy presence of God till, due to his mercy, it is purified of the stains of sin. Of course, the soul that is set in un-repentant mortal sin will find it utterly intolerable being in the presence of God — and that is its state forever. The point here is God’s infinite and all-holy mercy. St Thomas Aquinas says somewhere that the power of God, which is his most prominent feature in the mind of man, expresses itself in mercy. God is a God rich in mercy, and this is the dominant element in divine revelation.

God is all mercy. This is an astounding revelation. It describes what is the heart and soul of the ultimate Reality — the One who is the great God. In her prayer before her kinswoman Elizabeth, the Virgin Mary describes the God of historical revelation: He is the Saviour, whose “*mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation*” (Luke 1: 50). The problem of evil and suffering remains a great problem, but the evil of the world does not reveal the character of the ultimate and absolute One, the One who is

the Source, the Sustainer and the Term of all. On the contrary, the Lord of heaven and earth is all-merciful. The evil in the world has arisen from the world — specifically, from man and his rebellion against the all-merciful God. God is the Merciful One. But we must be careful about this. Islam also describes God as “the Compassionate” (al-rahīm) and “the Merciful” (al-rahīm) One — reflecting important elements of Judaeo-Christian revelation. The Christian religion points out, though, that God is not merciful simply as might be an indulgent ruler and absolute master. Rather, he is merciful precisely as a *Father* in whom one may trust. He is like the father of the prodigal son as described in Christ’s parable. Catherine of Genoa’s description is important: *“I see that as far as God is concerned, Paradise has no gates, but he who will may enter. For God is all mercy, and his open arms are ever extended to receive us into his glory.”* All of this brings us to our Gospel today (Matthew 17: 14 20), and in particular to the appeal of the man for his son. *“When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him.*

Lord, have mercy on my son, he said. He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water.” The man appealed for mercy, and Christ implied that what had been lacking was faith in the divine mercy. *“O unbelieving and perverse generation, Jesus replied, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me. Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed from that moment. Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, Why couldn’t we drive it out? He replied, Because you have so little faith.”*

How pleasing it is to God to see in us both repentance for sin (for he is all-holy), and trust in his divine mercy (for he is pure Love). Let us practise this trust in his mercy. Why not pray some simple prayer, over and over, such as this: *“Jesus, I trust You!”* Let us trust in him for his grace. Famous in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius Loyola is the prayer offering to God all, and asking that he give but his grace and his love. In this we can trust to the end, for

with grace and his love the one necessary thing is possible:
holiness of life.

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Second reflection:

Love Consider how in songs and stories of love, the lover says repeatedly to the beloved, I love you! This oft-repeated exclamation not only manifests the love he has for the beloved, but its repeated profession seems to increase the love. The Book of Deuteronomy presents the landmark words of Moses telling the Hebrews what must be uppermost in their religious life (ch.6). Their religious life is not just to consist of careful observances. It is to be a religion of the heart, one that cultivates a heart full of love for the God who has done so much for them. They are called to serve him by their obedience. Let them remember all he has done for them, and love him with their whole heart.

If with sincerity we repeatedly tell God we love him, this will not only express our love but increase it. Jesus, I love you! My God, I love you! Let us make that the constant refrain of our mind and heart. *If you love me*, Our Lord said, *you will keep my commandments*. So, let us tell God that we love him with an obedient love and a loving obedience.



Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 74 (73):20, 19, 22, 23 Look to your covenant, O Lord, and forget not the life of your poor ones for ever. Arise, O God, and defend your cause, and forget not the cries of those who seek you.

Collect Almighty ever living God, whom, taught by the Holy Spirit, we dare to call our Father, bring, we pray, to perfection in our hearts the spirit of adoption as your sons and daughters, that we may merit to enter into the inheritance which you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Kings 19:9.11-13; Psalm 84;

Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:22-33

Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. When evening

came, he was there alone, but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it. During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. It's a ghost, they said, and cried out in fear. But Jesus immediately said to them: Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid. Lord, if it's you, Peter replied, tell me to come to you on the water. Come, he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came towards Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, Lord, save me! Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. You of little faith, he said, why did you doubt? And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshipped him, saying, Truly you are the Son of God. (Matthew 14:22-33)

The faith of the Church In the midst of the storm, our Lord gives to Peter and to the Twelve a decisive reminder of the centrality of faith. “*Man of little faith*” he

said, “*why did you doubt?*” Our Lord’s every action as narrated in the Gospels, and all his words recorded therein, throw great light on our salvation and sanctification. So let us place ourselves in the scene. The disciples are “*far out on the lake,*” and “*battling with a heavy sea, for there was a headwind.*” The situation portrayed is a portent of the life of a large proportion of the human race, a situation with which every person in difficulty can identify. Then “*in the fourth watch of the night*” Jesus “*went towards them, walking on the lake*”. Inasmuch as the scene is of the Twelve in their boat making their way across to the other side, let us imagine them as a symbol of the Church, transporting us across the sea of life to our homeland in heaven. The sea is life, with all its difficulties and storms. Christ our Lord is with us in the middle of the sea and its rough weather. He is there, gazing at us, and we on him. What does he want from us? He does not intend that we be free of difficulties. He asks of us courage and faith in the midst of them. “*Courage, it is I. Do not be afraid.*” The source of our courage is he himself and his all-powerful

presence. To emphasize what is paramount, Jesus invites Peter to come to him across the water — in other words to exercise courage and faith. This, Peter hastens to do. But within moments, the wind being against him, Peter fails in his faith and begins to sink. Christ reaches out, saves him and says sadly, “*Man of little faith, why did you doubt?*” In page after page of the Gospels, our Lord asks for faith in himself and his word. Let us consider that faith. Faith in Jesus unites us not only to Jesus himself, but to all of those who are in the boat, and who are looking on him. That boat is the Church, and the Church is his creation. Our faith in Jesus — which is his gift to us — is our share in the Church’s faith. It unites us to Jesus, and to all who are in the boat with us gazing on the same Lord. It is because of our common faith that we are in the same boat. So it is that in union with him and them, our faith guides us across the sea of life to our homeland of heaven. It empowers us and the whole Church to believe in Christ’s love, in his power, and in his divine revelation.

There is an important point here, and it is this. The faith which we have, as God's precious gift, came to each of us through the ministry of the Church. We are not in the boat alone, gazing alone on Jesus in the midst of the storm. No, we are together in the boat, and that boat is Peter's boat, which is the Church. We have the Twelve around us, and we are gazing on Jesus with them. Just as our natural life is a gift of God, but comes to us by means of our natural parents, so too the gift of faith comes to us as a gift of God, but comes to us by means of the ministry of the Church. The Church is our mother in the order of grace, and this motherhood of the Church is typified by and embodied in Mary the mother of Jesus. She is the Church's foremost member, Christ's perfect disciple, and she was given to us by Christ in his dying moments on Calvary to be our mother. *Behold your mother!* he said to the beloved disciple. She typifies and embodies the Church our mother. A child entrusts himself to his parents who brought him into the world and who educate him for life. In like manner we, the members of the Church, look

to the Church as our mother and put our faith in her word. This is why the Holy Catholic Church is included in the Creed: *I believe in the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints.* We received the gift of faith from God through her, through the Church our mother. We trust her completely as the spiritual mother given to us by God. In this respect, Cardinal Newman taught that the Catholic religion and the Protestant religion are significantly different. While both believe in Jesus the Son of God, the Catholic looks to the Church as the voice of Christ for each generation, never presuming to subject the Church's teaching to his own judgment as to whether or not her formal teaching is true. The Catholic, as a Catholic, has accepted that Christ founded the Church to represent him. Hence he begins with faith in the word of the Church as being the word of Christ. He accepts its truth, since it comes from Christ the Church's head. The Protestant, precisely as Protestant, grounds his acceptance of doctrine on his own judgment, and makes his own decision as to what is Christ's truth and what is not. For him the

Church's word and doctrine is not the deciding authority, but is but one more authority which he must test in the court of his own judgment.

The Catholic acknowledges the Church as Christ's Church, and on that first principle he recognizes her teaching as Christ's teaching. He recognizes the Church as our spiritual mother, and accepts her faith as his faith. Therefore what the Church lays down, what the Church binds and loosens, he, the Catholic, accepts and believes. In the midst of the storm, Christ says, "*Man of little faith, why did you doubt?*" As we hear Christ's words, let us resolve to make the Church's faith always our own faith, never departing from it, and resolving always to recognize in her word the word of the living Jesus, living head of the Church age after age.

Further Reading: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*
no.168-169 ("Look on the faith of your church.")



Monday of the nineteenth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 74 (73):20, 19, 22, 23 Look to your covenant, O Lord, and forget not the life of your poor ones for ever. Arise, O God, and defend your cause, and forget not the cries of those who seek you.

Collect Almighty ever living God, whom, taught by the Holy Spirit, we dare to call our Father, bring, we pray, to perfection in our hearts the spirit of adoption as your sons and daughters, that we may merit to enter into the inheritance which you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezekiel 1:2-5.24-28; Psalm 148;

Matthew 17:22-27

As Jesus and his disciples were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is to be handed over to men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day.” And they were overwhelmed with grief. When

they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the temple tax approached Peter and said, “Does not your teacher pay the temple tax?” “Yes,” he said. When he came into the house, before he had time to speak, Jesus asked him, “What is your opinion, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take tolls or census tax? From their subjects or from foreigners?” When he said, “From foreigners,” Jesus said to him, “Then the subjects are exempt. But that we may not offend them, go to the sea, drop in a hook, and take the first fish that comes up. Open its mouth and you will find a coin worth twice the temple tax. Give that to them for me and for you.” (Matthew 17:22-27)

The Cross Siddhattha Gotama, revered by Buddhists as the supreme enlightened one, is generally considered to have been born at about 563 BC in present-day Nepal, and to have died at about 483 BC, aged 80 in Uttar Pradesh, India. If so, he would have been born a couple of decades after the deaths of Jeremiah and Ezechiel in faraway Judea, and may have died a little before the ministry of Ezra the Scribe of the Book of Ezra. Many

scholars place him at a later date, dying perhaps at about 400 BC. It is said that at the age of 29 Siddhartha left his palace to meet his subjects. He saw an old man, then a diseased man, a decaying corpse, and an ascetic. This encounter with suffering and death caused in him one of the great conversions of history, and he set out to attain the key to life and happiness, which is to say Enlightenment. At the age of 35 he gained, so he thought, his great insight into the cause of suffering and the steps needed to eliminate it. This is expressed in the “Four Noble Truths”, through mastery of which a state of full liberation is possible to all. The ideal of man is this perfect peace of mind free from all afflictive states, in which no personal identity remains. This is “Nirvana”. To the observer, it looks like an ideal of final oblivion in which the person finally passes out of his own identity: hardly a personal fulfilment! But let us notice that the whole quest here is for an absence of suffering. The circumvention of suffering is perfectly normal as a human ideal, and Buddha’s aim was to attain it. Indeed, final happiness and superlative bliss is,

according to revealed religion, the final destiny of man in heaven with God. But we notice a chasm between Buddhism and revealed religion as to the cause of suffering and evil: the cause, Buddha did not know, is *sin*. It is man's rebellion against God. There is nothing of this in Buddhism, which has no loving Creator. The great task, according to revealed religion, is not primarily the elimination of suffering but the elimination of *sin*. In the Book of Genesis, both Adam and Eve *sin*. What follows on sin? God declares to Eve, "*I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing (and).. your husband .. shall rule over you*". Adam will suffer in his work, and finally *die*.

I doubt that the notion that suffering and death in the world is ultimately due to man's Original and personal sin can be absolutely restricted to historical revelation. It may have been guessed at by this or that natural religion, but if so, at most but rarely. It is a distinctive feature of historical, Judeo-Christian revelation that the world's suffering is ultimately man's doing and is so from the beginning. Its origins lie in deliberate sin. As St Paul

writes, “*sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned*” (Romans 5:12). The task before the world, then, is to have sin taken away — and it is God who does that, by sending his only-begotten Son. “*God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him*” (John 3:17). The Son is, to use the words of John the Baptist, “*the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*” (John 1:29). But how was this to be done? What would possibly be the strategy for taking away the sin of the world, which is the root cause of man’s troubles? This is the other great surprise of the Christian revelation, together with several more that make up “*the mystery hidden for ages and generations*” (Colossians 1:26). The Saviour of the world came to embrace suffering in his obedient witness to the truth. It was precisely by accepting the Cross that he redeemed the world — the Cross being his witness to the truth unto a terrible death. All of this brings us to our Gospel today (Matthew 17:22-27). Jesus said to them, “*The Son of Man*

is to be handed over to men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day.” This was the means of doing the job. Obedient suffering, suffering embraced in obedience to his heavenly Father, was the means of taking away the root cause of evil and suffering which is sin. Once done, his Sacrifice in principle broke the power of sin over man — and of course, this result had to be applied, accepted, and then lived to the full by each person. For this reason it is an essential element in the life of the Church that the Church’s members hear the call of Christ to make disciples of all the nations so that all may benefit.

Evil and suffering, so manifestly a terrible negative for Buddha and for natural man, has by divine action become a means of new life. As Christ embraced in obedience the path of bearing witness to the truth amid suffering, so ought we. His example shows that God has drawn from the mess created by Satan and man a marvellous outcome. The man who wishes to be a saint has the most important means at hand: *obedience to God amid unavoidable suffering*. Let him follow the Master

day by day, and the Master's path will sanctify him, and through him will sanctify very many others.

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Second reflection:

Sanctity We read in the book of Deuteronomy that our vocation is “*to fear the Lord your God, to follow all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and soul, to keep the commandments and laws of the Lord.*” When we rise each morning to begin another day, we have in those words the programme for the day ahead. It is the programme of our whole life. The saints fulfilled this programme. Let us remember Saint Mary MacKillop, on whose tomb in the North Sydney convent chapel are written the words: “*Trust in God*”. The Cross in its various forms was laid on her shoulders, and she continually rose to the occasion of carrying it. Indeed she embraced it. What gave her strength to do so was her

trust in God and in his fatherly providence. If we wish to attain the goal of sanctity, then bearing the cross will be indispensable — indeed unavoidable.

The Cross, in whatever form God allows it to come to us, must be accepted and embraced with loving obedience. Let us then trust in God each day and he will bring us to the goal.



Tuesday of the nineteenth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 74 (73):20, 19, 22, 23 Look to your covenant, O Lord, and forget not the life of your poor ones for ever. Arise, O God, and defend your cause, and forget not the cries of those who seek you.

Collect Almighty ever living God, whom, taught by the Holy Spirit, we dare to call our Father, bring, we pray, to perfection in our hearts the spirit of adoption as your sons and daughters, that we may merit to enter into the inheritance which you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezekiel 2:8-3:4; Psalm 118;

Matthew 18:1-5.10.12-14

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little

children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost. (Matthew 18:1-5.10.12-14)

Great in the kingdom One of the intriguing features of ordinary Christian discourse is that the word “kingdom” has long since passed out of common usage. That is to say, we do not ordinarily refer to the “kingdom” of heaven, despite our use of it in the Lord’s Prayer. Of course, we are referring here simply to expressions, and not

to the reality conveyed by the expressions. It is not hard to understand why we do not ordinarily use this turn of phrase, so common in the Gospels and so frequently used by Jesus Christ himself. The Christian knows that the “*kingdom of heaven*” — or the “*kingdom of God*” — here on earth is essentially the Person of Jesus Christ and union with him. Specifically, the Catholic Christian knows that Christ, and therefore the “kingdom of heaven,” is accessed in Christ’s Church, and that the “*keys of the kingdom of heaven*” have been placed by Christ in the hands of Simon Peter, the Church’s visible Rock. So, references to the person of Christ or to Christ’s Church are assumed to be entirely sufficient. Nevertheless, the reader of the Gospels does notice on the one hand how frequent and prominent is the expression “*kingdom of heaven*” or “*kingdom of God*,” and on the other how infrequently we use it in ordinary Christian discourse. I say this merely to emphasize the reality of the “*kingdom of heaven*” in the preaching and instructions of our Lord himself, and in particular in our Gospel passage today. We should advert to it, or else we

may miss it. So real was the idea of “*the kingdom*” in our Lord’s proclamation, that his disciples took the “*kingdom*” to be very much like a temporal kingdom — which, of course, fitted in with the popular expectation anyway. St Luke, in the Acts of the Apostles, makes it clear that even after the Resurrection and prior to Pentecost, the disciples were expecting a temporal kingdom from Jesus. “*Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?*” (Acts 1:6). All up, it is plain that our Lord had been preaching very much on the establishment on earth of a “kingdom” — the “*kingdom of God*” or the “*kingdom of heaven*.”

So it is that the disciples well understood that God’s “kingdom” was coming, and that Jesus was to be the King. In our Gospel scene they come to our Lord with their question, and behind the question is their impression that the “*kingdom of heaven*” will contain all the apparatus of any kingdom. This will include the important people, the little people, and of course the “greatest” in the “kingdom.” Their question, then, is, who will be the “greatest” in the

kingdom of heaven? This was important to them, for we read a little later in the same Gospel that “*the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favour of him.*” The favour? “*Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.*” Then we read that “*when the other ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers*” (Matthew 20:20-24). They thought the two brothers were seizing the first places. Now, it was clear that Christ was allocating certain roles and missions within the “kingdom” to various disciples. From the disciples he had chosen Twelve to be with him and to be sent out in a special way to represent him, exercising certain of his powers in proclaiming the “kingdom.” These Twelve were altogether special, and it must have been plain that in the “kingdom” they were to exercise a fundamental role. Other disciples were called to various forms of service — we read of seventy-two being sent out in pairs. A structure was emerging. A little before our Gospel passage today, our Lord made it clear to his

disciples that he would build a “*Church*” and that Simon Peter was to be its “*Rock*.” To him he would give the “*keys of the kingdom of heaven*” (Matthew 16: 18-19). The “kingdom” would be present in his “Church,” and within the “kingdom” there would be various roles. But our Lord did not say about those exercising these roles that this or that one among them would be more or less “important” or “great.” He did not declare who would be the “greatest.” In appointing Simon to be the visible Rock of the Church, and the bearer of the keys, our Lord did not tell him that *he* would be the “*greatest in the kingdom of heaven*.” Would there be “the greatest” in this kingdom? Was it legitimate to aspire to be the “greatest”? Yes it was, *if properly understood*.

In our Gospel today our Lord makes it clear who is the “greatest” in the kingdom of heaven. “*I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven*” (Matthew 18:1 5.10.12 14). The

greatest in the kingdom of heaven is the humblest. To become “great” in God’s sight, one must be great in humility, and prefer the lowlier place. Our exemplar is Jesus Christ himself who, as St Paul writes, possessed the glory of God but set that aside and became as a slave, as men are, and lowlier still, even to death on a cross (Philippians 2:6). Let us pray for *understanding*, so as to pursue the path of true greatness, that of Jesus Christ.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 18)

“Unless you change and become like little children you will never enter the Kingdom” Time and again one comes across people — elderly people included — who are not aware of having committed any sins for a long time. After all, they say, all they do is live a quiet life. Clearly they think that the only real sin is the sin that can be observed, the sin of word or of deed. They also forget sins of omission. Cardinal Newman once pointed out that one could sit back, fold one’s arms, shut one’s eyes, and

commit a mortal sin that could take one to Hell forever. He was referring to sins of thought involving the will. St Paul writes in one of his Letters “*let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.*” We must sanctify our minds. Let us begin by adverting to what is going on in our mind and heart most of the day, every day. No one sees this except God — but think of the lack of charity and numerous other sins that occur in the sanctuary of one’s heart, under the constant gaze of God.

Our Lord in today’s Gospel asks us to “*become like little children.*” That is, we are to become humble and docile — and this applies not only to our words and deeds, but to the whole life of the mind. Sanctity will be gained or lost depending on the extent to which we sanctify our minds and hearts, and not only our audible words and manifest deeds. Let us aim, then, to put on the mind and heart of Christ and to act in mind and heart like “little children.”



Wednesday of the nineteenth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 74 (73):20, 19, 22, 23 Look to your covenant, O Lord, and forget not the life of your poor ones for ever. Arise, O God, and defend your cause, and forget not the cries of those who seek you.

Collect Almighty ever living God, whom, taught by the Holy Spirit, we dare to call our Father, bring, we pray, to perfection in our hearts the spirit of adoption as your sons and daughters, that we may merit to enter into the inheritance which you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezekiel 9:1-7;10:18-22; Psalm 112;

Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus said to his disciples, If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that

‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them. (Matthew 18:15-20)

The divine presence One of the reasons why we *sin* is that we think no one is watching — just as one reason why people break the law is that they think no one is watching. When a marked police car is among a group of cars, none of them exceeds the speed limit — because they are being watched. In the third chapter of the Book of Genesis, we have the first dialogue — not the first words uttered, but the first dialogue. It is a dialogue between the Serpent and the woman, and it is conducted as if God is absent. This is a factor in the scene in which the woman

sins by eating of the forbidden fruit, and proceeds to induce her husband to sin. It is done as if God is absent. When “*the sound of the Lord God*” is “*heard*” by them “*walking in the garden*” — the divine presence *adverted to*, perhaps — they are ashamed. They “*hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God*” (Genesis 3: 1-11). There are two great temptations in the matter of religion. One is that we can think that God is far away out of all sight, and that we live out of his sight. So we can do as we wish, eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil — which is to say, deciding for ourselves what is right and wrong. The other temptation is to think that God is indeed very near, but in a sense that distorts him. He is too near in the sense that “God” is little more than what we take to be the ultimates of *this world*. Our god is nature, or sport — but certainly not an all-holy Lawgiver and Judge. As a matter of fact, the all-holy transcendent One is closer to us than we can possibly imagine. He sustains our every move, our every utterance, and indeed our every thought and movement of the heart. While he sustains, he observes,

and what he observes pleases or displeases him. That God can be pleased is shown by our Lord's words, in which he states that "*I always do what is pleasing to him*" (John 8:20), and by the Father's words at Christ's baptism: "*You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased*" (Mark 1: 11). Man must please God in all that he thinks, says and does.

But the significant thing about the human race is that it is mired in sin. Characteristically, in his action man does not please God for he is a sinner — and consider what sin involves. The loving Creator of man and the world sustains everything that exists and that acts. God sustains us in all that we do, and he sustains us as we sin. He is giving to us the gift of life and being as we engage in our sinful thoughts, words or deeds. The reality is that he, the all-holy One, is indescribably close to us as we displease him by our sinful action. This fact of the divine immanence both adds to the horror of sin, and provides a powerful motive for not sinning. But we need to remember the sustaining presence of the all-holy Creator for this fact

to have its salutary effect on us. While God utterly transcends the world, mankind and every individual, he is intimately present to every aspect of their created being and life. As already said, this ought to be a powerful motive for taking every step to live a moral and holy life. Now all of this is reinforced and fulfilled in revealed religion, where God has established the closest relationship with his chosen people. As the prophets reveal, he is a *Husband* to his people, and he looks on them as his *spouse*. He sent his only-begotten Son to be God-with-them, the Bridegroom who would die for all the children of God. In his Son Jesus Christ, God dwells in our midst within the Church his body. For the individual Christian who is in the state of grace, the Holy Trinity dwells within. All this is a powerful motive for living a holy life and for helping others to do so — which brings us to our Gospel today (Matthew 18: 15-20). Our Lord speaks of correcting our brother: “*If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.*” The Church must be

holy, for the Bridegroom dwells in her midst. This great fact of the abiding presence of God in Christ is stressed again when our Lord says that *“if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”*

Holiness will depend on one’s living in the recognized presence of God. The all-holy transcendent God is ever present because he sustains all. He is also present in Christ the saving Bridegroom, the One who has delivered man from the power of sin. He desires each of us and the Church his body to be holy. He wishes each of us to correct, in brotherly manner, the sins perpetrated within his Body the Church, and he wishes us to pray knowing that he is always present and part of our life and our prayer. Let us so live that each of us and the entire Church are pleasing to him who gazes on us with love.



Thursday of the nineteenth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 74 (73):20, 19, 22, 23 Look to your covenant, O Lord, and forget not the life of your poor ones for ever. Arise, O God, and defend your cause, and forget not the cries of those who seek you.

Collect Almighty ever living God, whom, taught by the Holy Spirit, we dare to call our Father, bring, we pray, to perfection in our hearts the spirit of adoption as your sons and daughters, that we may merit to enter into the inheritance which you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezekiel 12:1-12; Psalm 77;

Matthew 18:21-19:1

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times? Jesus answered, I tell you, not seven times, but seventy seven times. Therefore, the kingdom of

heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy

on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart. When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. (Matthew 18:21-19:1)

Forgive! Among what we might call the classical sages, Jesus Christ lays down one of the toughest of requirements: *we are always to forgive*, no matter what the offence. It must be forgiveness not only in word and deed, but from the heart. Let us set this demanding requirement in some sort of context. The word “forgive” may be understood as deriving from the word “give” — as in “give up.” Give up what? Bishop Joseph Butler’s much-discussed 18th century sermon on resentment and forgiveness (in his *Fifteen Sermons Preached at Rolls Chapel*) places special emphasis on giving up *resentment*. That provides one marker. One can go beyond this to

“giving up” the demand for compensation. In any case, by a free act of “giving up”, the victim alters the wrongdoer’s status in relation to himself, and the two are reconciled. The one who forgives benefits morally by his act, and the one being forgiven will probably benefit morally too because his past act is thus released from a form of permanence. The various notions of forgiveness and their moral value have long been philosophically contested. Aristotle writes that the person deficient in appropriate anger is “unlikely to defend himself” and “endure being insulted” and for this reason can be a “fool” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1126a5). In general, it would appear that both Plato and Aristotle suggest that anger controlled by or expressive of reason manifests virtue, whereas anger ungoverned by rationality is a vice. So for Aristotle, a rational “anger” is virtuous. Plutarch states that “we grow angry with enemies and friends, with children and parents, yes, even with the gods, with wild beasts and soulless implements” (*Moralia*, Volume 6). So it is natural to be angry. It is also natural to expect that one be requited, and till this is forthcoming, it

may not be clear that one ought overcome one's anger except for the sake of personal wellbeing. All up, I think we could say that the moral dictum of Jesus Christ on forgiveness far surpasses what ordinary human reason commonly requires of the man who wishes to be moral. What, then, is our Lord saying about the act of forgiving genuine injury, and doing so from the heart?

Our Lord begins, not with what seems to be “rational” — such as, that it is best for one's own happiness to forgive from the heart, or that, in view of the unknown mitigating circumstances it is prudent to forgive, or that one becomes more magnanimous (and so a better man) in forgiving — but with *what God does*. God is a God of love, and this love is manifested in mercy and forgiveness. Indeed, St Thomas Aquinas writes that the almighty power of God is shown in his mercy. Now, a special manifestation of his mercy is forgiveness. Our Lord's great mission was to reveal his heavenly Father in his own person and teaching. His preferred mode of teaching was the parable and in his parable today he gives a striking

image of the divine way of acting. *“The kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.”* That was normal practice, and quite “rational.” The king would at least reclaim something of what he was owed, and what he was owed was impossibly great. Although the value of the “Talent” varied depending upon the area in which it was used, 10,000 talents was a truly enormous sum. It was equivalent to millions upon millions of dollars. The “servant” may be regarded as a tributary prince, nevertheless the debt was impossible. That is man’s situation before God. He is totally indebted to him, and the debt is beyond payment. Were God to require payment, man would be ruined beyond imagining. But, man having presented himself in all his poverty to his divine Lord and asking mercy, this mercy is immediately accorded in the form of forgiveness of the debt. That is where our Lord

begins. He starts from the nature of the ineffable God, which he reveals. On the basis of this revelation Christ commands that we be like our heavenly Father. God's nature, thus revealed by his divine Son, is the norm for moral living. The Christian knows and loves Jesus Christ, and receives his grace, and so willingly strives to forgive.

Let us keep our eyes on Jesus Christ as the exemplar of what it means to be truly human. Christ, and not Plato, Aristotle, or any of the world's greatest minds or religious leaders, is man's norm, man's teacher, inspirer, and source of life. On the Mountain, with Christ before his disciples in a dazzling glory, the voice came from the shining cloud, announcing, "*This is my Son. Listen to him!*" However we understand the mechanics of forgiveness, the one thing we just must do, is forgive. This is not just to be forgiveness in word and deed, but from the heart. Too difficult? For man, indeed it is so. But all things are possible for God! So let us insistently ask for his grace to do it.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 18:21-19:1)

“...unless you each forgive your brother from your heart” If there is one thing that drives a great deal of the life of societies and individuals, it is the sense of hurt and injury, and the anger resulting therefrom. Consider the worldwide terrorism and strife within and among nations. Consider the protracted inner hurt and anger going on in the minds and hearts of so many individuals, due to past and present experiences. What is the answer to this? A most important part of the answer is the need to find a way to forgive. So many people seem unable to forgive. In today’s Gospel our Lord tells the story of the forgiven steward who himself refused to forgive. He was forgiven an impossible debt by his king. Immediately he went out and inflicted suffering on his fellow servant who had not paid his debt to him, a debt that was paltry by comparison with what he had owed to his king. He forgot how greatly he had been forgiven.

We shall go a long way towards being able to forgive our brother if we keep ever before our minds how sinful *we* are and have been, how indebted to God *we* are in consequence, and how much God has done to forgive *our* debt. Let us then grow in our sense of sin and in the mercy of God in our regard. Filled more and more with the sense of this, we shall be more and more disposed to be merciful to *others* in respect to *their* transgressions.



Friday of the nineteenth week of Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: Ezekiel 16:1-15.60.63; (Psalm:) Isaiah 12;
Matthew 19:3-12

Some Pharisees approached him, and tested him, saying, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause whatever?" He said in reply, "Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator 'made them male and

female’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate.” They said to him, “Then why did Moses command that the man give the woman a bill of divorce and dismiss her?” He said to them, “Because of the hardness of your hearts Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. I say to you, whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful) and marries another commits adultery.”
(Matthew 19:3-12)

Marriage It is natural for the human being to take pride in what he “does,” in his “work.” A man may build his own house, or create and develop his own garden, or build up his professional work, raise his family, or do some other “work” in life that gives him a certain pride and joy. What he “does” and the “work” he develops is an important expression of himself. We must understand this broadly, for a sick and bedridden person can have a “work”

to do in life, and it might be to suffer well. St Bernadette Soubirous (1844–1879) said as she began her last illness that it was her last “job.” One might say that a person’s work — what he actually does — expresses and conveys his most important thoughts and values. It is his “word”, his statement, to the world. Pope John Paul II entitled his most important philosophical book, *The Acting Person*. This placed the emphasis on a person’s *action* rather than simply on his thought. Let’s take the point further. As man has his work, so *God* works. The work of God that is most immediately evident to us is *creation*. We see this work all around us, and the Book of Genesis opens with God doing this very work, the work of creating the world. As something he “does,” creation is something he “says.” It is his statement. Created nature, the world that is before us, is the word of the Creator to those who can hear or read it. There is a strong line of thought in English theism and apologetics that begins with the dictum that *nature is the voice of God*. The nature — the created world — into which we are born, and of which we are a part, and which

continually surrounds us, speaks of its Author who has expressed himself in it. It is his word, his voice, his created statement. Cardinal Newman famously took the point a step further and pointed to the natural *conscience* as the voice of its divine Author, revealing not only his will but something of his nature. But now, there are other things in the world which, in the divine plan, are especially the work of God and therefore are his voice. They express his own divine nature (to a point) and therefore his will. Our Gospel passage today points to one great thing in the world which has come from the hand of God: *marriage between man and woman*. It is marriage — marriage is God's creation.

I am not sure that man would be able to see with his own unaided reason that a true marriage is indissoluble and monogamous. The voice of mankind on the point is so mixed and confused. Fallen human nature seems, on the face of it, to have failed to attain clarity on this point. But such is the case in many other matters too — such as the primary truth of there being one, infinite God. Though the

human reason is capable of attaining this truth, the fact is that the testimony of mankind is profoundly discordant in the matter of the deity. So it is in the question of *marriage*. The voice of mankind is discordant. But we have the immense benefit of a divine revelation not only in respect to the nature of the deity itself, but in respect to many other matters, marriage included. At the outset of the inspired Scriptures — which is to say, in the first two chapters of the first book of the Bible — man is taught that there is but one almighty God who is the creator of all, and that he created marriage too. Further, we have the inestimable benefit of the teaching of Jesus Christ on this matter of the teaching of the first two chapters of Genesis on marriage (Genesis 1:27; 2:18.24). Christ has authoritatively interpreted the meaning of Genesis 1 and 2 on marriage. *“Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female’ and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined*

together, no human being must separate” (Matthew 19:3-12). If the world and nature, being the work of God’s hands, constitute his word and express something of his nature, this is so for marriage too. Marriage is a divine statement. Genesis states that the image of God is given in the complementarity of man and woman: *“In the divine image he created him; male and female he created them”* (Genesis 1:27). Marriage, which is the work of God, reflects the life of God. It reveals both his love for man who is the work of his hands, and it reveals the communion within himself that is his own life. The communion of love between the divine Persons of the godhead is eternally indissoluble, and he joins man and wife in marriage to reflect this. Marriage and its indissolubility is a divine statement. Thus is the bond of marriage by nature indissoluble. *What God has joined, man must not divide.*

Much light on the meaning of things comes from reason, but our best light comes from divine revelation. That revelation is present in its fullness in the person and word of Jesus Christ. He has thrown light on the work of

God that is marriage. Marriage is God's creation. He himself joins husband and wife in marriage, and being his work, their marriage is his word. It reflects not only his will for them, but something of himself and his nature. Marriage is a natural revelation, and it reveals both the love of God for man, and the loving communion that constitutes his own life. Let every married couple, then, make it their mission in life to live as a reflection of the divine.

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Second reflection:

Providence There is an old saying that is quoted in a variety of contexts. It is that the wine glass when held up can be viewed as either half full or half empty. That is to say, we can focus on the good things we have been given, or we can focus on all the things we have not been given. In the Old Testament Book of Joshua there is set before the reader what God had done for his chosen people. They had lived “*beyond the River (i.e. the Euphrates) .. and they served other gods*” (Joshua ch.24). Then God

took the initiative, bringing Abraham to the land of Canaan. He delivers them from slavery and brings them through the wilderness, across the river Jordan to Jericho and the promised land. During the course of their years in the wilderness many of the people had complained of all they did not have. They had forgotten what God had done for them. They looked at the glass God had given them and saw it as nearly empty.

Let us discern the loving hand of God in the course of events in life. It is quite possible to focus on all the things we would like to have had, and which we feel we have been denied. Rather than this, let us keep our sight on the deeper reality, the loving hand of God giving so much to us filling the glass rather than emptying it. At the heart of the universe and enveloping it is Love and Mercy. Let us live in the presence of this divine Mercy so as to be instruments of it to others.



Saturday of the nineteenth week of Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: Ezekiel 18:1-10.13.30-32; Psalm 50;
Matthew 19:13-15

Children were brought to Jesus that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked them, but Jesus said, “Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them; for the Kingdom of heaven belongs to such

as these.” After he placed his hands on them, he went away. (Matthew 19:13-15)

God so near There is a mysterious, even breathtaking character to the universe, as it appears to religious man. I use the expression “religious man” advisedly, for man is generally “religious.” There are exceptions to this, such as modern secular man — which is to say, man as influenced by the secularity that has arisen from modern Western culture. Generally, though, man is religious. He acknowledges the reality of the Deity or deities, and the world’s dependence (to a point) on the Power or powers above. He invokes divine intervention so as to avert or sway the course of the world. But despite the world being seen as the work of the divine in this or that sense, man very, very often sees the divine as *distant*. Man is in the world, and the world is the work of God, but God, the ultimate principle from which the world has come, remains far from him. One would expect that visible nature — the world — being the work and therefore the voice of God, would bring God near to man. But despite

the world, God is typically perceived as ever distant. In fact, one can sustain a fairly logical case, provided the starting points are granted, for considering that there is no God at all. It is certainly the case that God is sufficiently distant as to make it easy for man to ignore him completely and to carry on in the world as if he did not exist. I choose to regard this intellectual position as further evidence of the perceived distance of God from man and the world. Yet man yearns for him, or for something like him that is more and greater than the things of this world, which provide him with earthly and more immediate satisfaction. So it is that we have the religions of man. Man and society yearn for the divine and the religions implement this yearning. At the same time God is out of our sight, hearing and touch. He is imagined in the practice of religion, but the reflective person knows that these are mere imaginings. The divine seems out of earshot, and beyond our pictures of him. From man's point of view God is, indeed, the Beyond. Is man, then, condemned to a fundamental

frustration? Is life (as such philosophers as Satre and Camus insisted) therefore absurd and meaningless?

The real and true God has revealed himself to be a God of massive surprises. He has intervened and shown that he is a real and living Person overflowing with the love that yearns to be near. *God is with us*. He is close. More still, he says to us, *come to me*. Rudolf Otto wrote his book (*The Idea of the Holy — Das Heilige*, 1917) showing the natural dread evoked by the Numinous. The Numinous is a *mysterium tremendum*. But what the God of Revelation says to man is, *Come to me!* He draws close to us, and says, *Come!* Further, he sustains us as we approach, and smiles as we enter his intimate company. This is the meaning of the Christian revelation, and in particular of the person and message of Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man. This brings us to our Gospel today, so expressive of the entire meaning of divine revelation. Our Lord says of the little children, do not prevent them from approaching me, for it is persons like them who enter the Kingdom of my heavenly Father. “*Children were brought to Jesus that*

he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked them, but Jesus said, 'Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them; for the Kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.' After he placed his hands on them, he went away” (Matthew 19:13-15). In company with Jesus Christ, puny man, man the sinner, man who is so vulnerable and weak, may approach the living and all-holy God with confidence and remain near to him. He who is the Son of God addresses us as his “friends.” I have not called you servants any more, he tells his disciples — I have called you friends. Elsewhere he says to them, *“Come to me, all you who labour and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am meek and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls”* (Matthew 11: 28-30). The Word made flesh describes himself as meek and humble in heart! God is meek and humble before his creatures, and he invites each of his own to approach him with confidence. This is the true God. Man tends to have a completely false

impression of God — if there is a God!!! — and it is because of the curse of sin.

Christ commands that we *be like little children, for of such is the kingdom of heaven*. The child tends to trust, and hopefully is docile. He docilely trusts and obeys. He stays close to his parent, and does not stray from him in wilful independence. God has revealed that he wants us to regard him as our Father, a loving and merciful Father, one to whom we can always go. Let us bring this grand message, which is the good news of the Gospel, to modern secular man for whom God is very much out of sight. Let us be like the parents of our Gospel scene bringing their children to Jesus Christ to receive his blessing. This is what it is to be a Christian in the world. It means bringing the children of this world to him for his blessing.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 19:13-15)

“Let the little children alone, and do not stop them coming to me” People “*brought little children to*

Jesus for him to lay his hands on them and say a prayer.”

Imagine the power of that prayer said by Christ for a child! Our Lord loved children and the parents of children knew it and wanted him to give them his blessing. Our Lord makes it clear in the same passage that he loves and welcomes anyone who is like a child. We think of guilelessness, innocence, docility, trust — all the good attitudes of childhood that make a child loveable. These attitudes correspond to certain adult spiritual attitudes which are essential to the spiritual life and make the adult loveable to Christ. What are these attitudes? The most important “childlike” attitude is that of looking on God unfailingly as our Father, and on ourselves as his children. Christ came to enable us to be sons and daughters of his heavenly Father, sharing the Spirit of him who is the only begotten Son. Saint after saint has stressed this truth of our *divine filiation*, our being adopted children of the Father. It is not

only the foundation of our relationship with God, but it is also the foundation of our relationship with one another. God is our Father, with the stress on both words in the predicate — both “our” and “father”. We are brothers in Christ who look to God as the Father of us all.

Therefore let us strive to think and to live as children in Christ of our common Father. If we do this, Christ will warmly welcome us as he did the children who were presented to him. He will lay his hands on us, as it were, and pour his blessings down upon us. He will want us to be with him, and we on our part will love being with him.



Twentieth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 84 (83):10-11 Turn your eyes, O God, our shield; and look on the face of your anointed one; one day within your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.

Collect O God, who have prepared for those who love you good things which no eye can see, fill our hearts, we pray, with the warmth of your love, so that, loving you in all things and above all things, we may attain your promises, which surpass every human desire. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 56:1.6-7; Psalm 66;

Romans 11:13-15.29-32; Matthew 15:21-28

Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon

possession. Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us. He answered, I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. The woman came and knelt before him. Lord, help me! she said. He replied, It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs. Yes, Lord, she said, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table. Then Jesus answered, Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted. And her daughter was healed from that very hour. (Matthew 15:21-28)

Faith With good reason Jesus Christ is commonly viewed as the embodiment and exemplar of kindness, compassion, consideration, sensitivity, and winning service. We may say, to use a secular description — and hopefully without disrespect — that he is the consummate gentleman. But in our Gospel today we see him, in studied fashion, ignoring the pleas of one who is desperate for his attention. The pagan woman came after him insistently with her request to drive out the demon

from her daughter. He ignored her despite her loud appeals, and made her wait even for so much as an answer, let alone for the granting of her request. Why? Plainly, he was testing her faith. Her faith was persistent and it won the answer she was looking for. Perhaps with a smile full of kindness, our Lord said to her, “*Woman, you have great faith. Let your wish be granted.*” And from that moment her daughter was well again. The faith of the pagan woman amounted to an unyielding trust that our Lord had the power to do what she wanted of him, and the goodness to grant her request. She addressed him respectfully as “Son of David,” and as “Lord” (*kurie*). As the prayer of a pagan, it was magnificent — bold, respectful, humble, faith-filled, persistent. It shows the extent to which a natural religious faith, built on natural foundations such as the natural sense of God and on what can be plainly seen, can avail. Let us think of her when we think of those of other religions. We ought respect them, just as Christ commended the Canaanite woman for her faith. Her faith pleased him, and because of it he answered her prayer for

aid. One wonders to what extent the world has been sustained by the prayers that have arisen from the hearts of individuals who do not know divine revelation, however poorly may have been their notions of the Deity. After all, how exact and sophisticated was the Canaanite woman's notion of "the Son of David"? Further, the faith of the Canaanite woman ought also remind us of the supernatural blessing that is divine faith, that faith which comes as a gift from God, enabling and inclining us to believe fully in Jesus Christ. We receive this supernatural gift of faith from God through the ministry and sacraments of the Church, specifically at our Baptism.

We ought treasure the thought of this gift of divine faith, much greater than a natural faith. Our faith is a supernatural gift enabling us to believe not only in the power of Jesus to answer our prayers, but to believe all that he revealed himself to be. It is a gift enabling and inclining us to live by faith in Christ's word because that word comes from his lips, rather than living simply by sight. We do not believe simply on the basis of what we see and

understand for ourselves. We receive this word of his, together with the revelation it contains, by means of the witness and teaching of the Church, his mystical body and envoy. Thus in our life of faith, the Church is our mother. The Church nurtures us in our faith in Jesus, and teaches us what to believe about him. Faith involves embracing that teaching with the intent to live according to it. It involves guarding that teaching in our hearts, and rejecting anything that could corrupt that teaching, or lessen our acceptance of it. Specifically, and pivotally, it means knowing and loving the Church's doctrine. The faith of a Christian is not simply trust in the person of Jesus Christ — without much reference to his objective teaching. The faith of a Christian is indeed trust in the person of Jesus Christ, but this is manifested and guided by the full acceptance of the specifics of his teaching — and these specifics are set forth in the doctrines and dogmas of the Church. So the Christian faith is Creedal, which is to say it is shaped and nourished by the Christian Creed. There are definite, specific, objective truths which the Christian knows he

must believe about Jesus Christ if he is to be a Christian at all. Those objective truths are encapsulated in the Creed. In St Luke's Gospel our Lady is described as treasuring all these things and pondering them in her heart. That is what we ought be doing in respect to the Church's own doctrinal expressions of her teaching. At Mass we commonly recite the Nicene Creed (although the Apostles' Creed is also used). The shorter Apostles' Creed is the ancient Creed of the Church in Rome. It is customarily used in private prayer, and is often said at the beginning of the recitation of the Rosary. Let us cherish the Creed and make it a prayer, while meditating on it as the hallowed statement of our faith. As well as this, we ought read carefully the Church's much fuller official expressions of the faith, her Catechisms and other formal statements of faith.

Years ago the Church produced her *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the fullest that the Church has ever issued. I would recommend the frequent reading of this most important book. Beyond this I would recommend a careful reading of the ongoing teaching of the Pope of the

day, so easy to do now, even by the Internet, and so profitable. The point is this. We ought nourish our lives with Christ's revelation as it comes to us in Scripture, especially the Gospels, and in the Church's official expressions of her Tradition. In today's Gospel, our Lord commended the pagan woman for her faith. Let us for our part, cherish and nourish our Catholic and Christian faith.

Further Reading: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*
no.170, 171 (The language of faith)



Monday of the twentieth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 84 (83):10-11 Turn your eyes, O God, our shield; and look on the face of your anointed one; one day within your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.

Collect O God, who have prepared for those who love you good things which no eye can see, fill our hearts, we pray, with the warmth of your love, so that, loving you in all things and above all things, we may attain your promises, which surpass every human desire. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezekiel 24:15-24; (Ps.:) Deuteronomy 32;
Matthew 19:16-22

Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life? Why do you ask me about what is good? Jesus replied. There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the

commandments. Which ones? the man enquired. Jesus replied, 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honour your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbour as yourself.' All these I have kept, the young man said. What do I still lack? Jesus answered, If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me. When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth. (Matthew 19:16-22)

Goodness The animal does not have thoughts but impressions. It is governed by its impressions of things, in that its instincts come into play in response to impressions. Those instincts then govern its behaviour. The lion stalking its prey has no freedom about it — it is being driven by its own highly developed instincts. It does not properly know of its own independent existence, nor of the independent existence as such of what it is stalking. It certainly has no notion of what is right or wrong in any action, nor does it have the slightest responsibility for its

actions. It is reacting to impressions and is carried along by its instincts. Thus the species survives and serves a higher purpose. Man, though, instinctively knows that there are things out there that exist in their own right, that are independent of himself, and that have their own proper value. Man knows that this is this and that is that in a truly objective sense, and that these things are to be respected in their due measure. He instinctively knows that there is an objective right and a wrong. He, and other persons too, must do what is right and avoid what is wrong, and he and others are responsible for their actions. Man has the innate *power* to know objective reality — and he *does* know external things. He also knows that he must be good by choosing to do what is morally right. Of course, these powers of intellect and will must be developed by right teaching and example, but such a development is founded on his powers as a man and is utterly beyond the powers of the animal. Normally there is no question in society as to the requirement of morality that people be morally good. While “the devil is in the detail”, it is granted that the

ethical life is obligatory. It could also be argued that man *normally* has an implicit sense of the One who sustains the things he sees, and of the One who commands in the moral dictates of his conscience. However, in a secular age with few supports for the acceptance of a Reality that transcends the immediate objects of experience, modern man tends to think that this world is all that there is. Among other things, he assumes that when it comes to moral goodness, we look simply to Man. If it is present at all, it is there.

What this means is that we of the modern secular age tend to think that man can be good without religion. Religion is an unnecessary appendage to the business of being a good person. There are plenty of people, we think, who are good, and plenty more who could be good, without God. Works of popular literature feature many of them. We also think that people are bad without any reference to God. God is irrelevant to the manifest requirement of the moral life. All this brings us to our Gospel passage today (Matthew 19:16-22), in which the man comes to Jesus and asks, tellingly, what *good thing* he must do to gain eternal

life. He is giving voice to a fundamental perception of the human being. Unless there is some mental disorder in a person, he will know that he should do what is right and that his happiness will depend on it. There is a sense of a future reckoning in this perception. Of course, the man who asks this of Jesus is a member of God's chosen people, and has had the benefit of divine revelation and the sacred tradition of the children of Abraham. His basic moral perceptions have had the benefit of this guidance and development, and the Supernatural is not at issue. Still, his question stands as representative of the human spirit. The danger, looking at it in terms of the sweep of humanity, is that the good life will be seen as not needful of God. I can be a good person, and God has little to do with it — this was the position of Buddha and Confucius. So the man comes to Jesus with his question, and our Lord answers with a great reminder that goodness is not found ultimately in this world as if grounded therein. Moral goodness is founded in *God*. The goodness to which man naturally aspires and by which he is obligated is to be immediately

referred to God as its Author and Sustainer. Indeed, the very voice of conscience stipulating the moral law intimates a holy Lawgiver and Judge as its Source. As *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, “*when he listens to his conscience, the prudent man can hear God speaking*” (1777). Christ’s answer takes our man to the Source of goodness: “*Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only One who is good.*”

The deepest hunger of man is for the Truth and for the Good — and this, combined, is Beauty. Man is especially made to be good. Christ reminds the man that he will be good if he pleases and obeys God (“*If you want to enter life, obey the commandments*”). But he then offers a new revelation which was the burden of his mission and which is the mission of the Church of the ages. It is that *perfection* in the moral life is available to man in and through the following of Jesus Christ. Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life for man who is called to be a saint. The ringing call to man, intimated by his conscience and made clear by divine revelation, is that he must strive for

sanctity. The way to this is through loving and following Christ, in whom dwells the fullness of the Godhead.



Tuesday of the twentieth week in Ordinary Time

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Collect O God, who have prepared for those who love you good things which no eye can see, fill our hearts, we pray, with the warmth of your love, so that, loving you in all things and above all things, we may attain your promises, which surpass every human desire. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezekiel 28:1-10; (Ps:) Deuteronomy 32;
Matthew 19:23-30

Then Jesus said to his disciples, I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of

God. When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, Who then can be saved? Jesus looked at them and said, With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. Peter answered him, We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us? Jesus said to them, I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first. (Matthew 19:23-30)

Possessions You are sitting outside your house, perhaps on the verandah, watching the birds fly past. It is a beautiful day, and the birds offer a melody which adds beauty to the silence of the scene. You notice that some of them have dead grass in their beaks, and they are in flight to their nests in order to build up their abodes for

themselves and their young. They are gathering the material that they need. Or again, a dog carefully buries its bones for a future day — and it knows where it has placed them, and how to retrieve them. I remember years ago when I was a boy we had a dog that used bury its bones. On one occasion visitors brought their dog, and our dog dug up its bones and placed them in a heap, stood over its bones and then triumphantly watched the visiting dog. The visiting dog could only bark in frustration, knowing it was surpassed by our dog because of all its bones. Our dog was the top dog because of its possessions. Animals gather and accumulate things that they need. They build their own dwellings, and get their own food. But of course, the animal has to do this by force of material instinct. Its own instinct compels it to do this. It has no choice in respect to the goals of its activity. If the lioness is hungry, and sees that its cubs are hungry, it has to seek a kill. It has no choice but to gather its food in its own way, for it is driven by its instinct for self-preservation. The only thing that will deflect it from this course is the same material instinct.

In the face of a greater danger it will not attack on its own something which may overpower it, such as a bull elephant, a rhino, or a powerful wild buffalo. In this discrimination, it acts under the compulsion of instinct. Man also gathers and accumulates things, be they his food, his shelter, his clothing, whatever it be that he needs. There is this difference with man, that he is not entirely subject to his material instincts. He has the power within himself to select his goals, transcend his material instincts (for life, sensual pleasure, or whatever), and choose goals that answer to much higher aspirations. Man yearns for things that are beyond the merely material. For instance, he yearns for interpersonal communion and, yes, even for matters entirely unseen — such as, and especially, the unseen, all-holy God.

The illustration with which we started was the power to gather, collect, and to “own” things. Man does this constantly, and there are parallels in the animal kingdom, as we have seen. For his part, man does this as a matter of choice. He freely gathers and collects in order to attain the

goals he freely sets himself. His goals could include material security, the pleasures which are possible by means of his possessions, and a certain status before other people (just as the dog was “top dog” because of its bones). He has made a choice to get rich, and so he gathers, possesses and uses material things to attain his goals. By ordinary reflection alone we might be able to see that the purpose of the material world, which is man’s natural home, is precisely to provide him with the material means to attain his chosen goals. Divine revelation certainly makes it clear that this is the case. Now, the whole question for man turns on *what he chooses* to be his goals. He is not compelled by instinct — and if indeed he acts as one who is *subject* to material instincts, then this itself is the *fruit* of a choice or many choices. Man senses and knows that he is not compelled to act by forces within or outside of him. He is free, but free in the sense that he is able to choose what he should choose. He is able to do his duty. His freedom serves that purpose, the purpose of doing what he sees, in all sincerity, to be truly right. Now,

what is his duty? His duty is to strive to know, love and serve God here on earth, and by that means to attain his company in heaven. This is his higher aspiration, leading him to yearn for God and for the moral good. This, then, should govern all his dealings with material possessions. Now, the bedevilling problem is that the possession of material things, especially the possession of an abundance of material things, can deflect his very desire for God and for moral goodness. He can so easily become attached to the things of the world and uninterested in the higher things for which he is made to yearn, and in which his greatest happiness lies. All of this brings us to our Gospel today (Matthew 19:23-30). Our Lord's teaching is clear: the rich man will find it hard to enter the kingdom of God because he is subject to the danger of loving the things he possesses more than the God whom he does not possess.

Our Lord promises that *“everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.”* How “leaving all” for Christ’s

sake is to be lived out in the concrete will depend on each one's calling, circumstances, and the providence of God. But the point is absolutely clear. Jesus Christ, the Son of God and our Redeemer, is to be the grand Object of our heart and our life. This is what we ought be striving to "possess." All other things that we might seek in life ought have the function of aiding us in this grand project, the love and service of God in Jesus Christ.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 19:23-30)

"For God everything is possible" Time and again in the Gospels our Lord refers to our entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. How does this happen? We enter the Kingdom of Heaven when we enter into union with Jesus Christ, and live in accord with living in him. As St Paul writes: this is the mystery now revealed: *Christ in you — your hope of glory*. Our aim in life ought be to be totally in Christ, totally united to him. But of course there are many obstacles to this union with our Lord. In our Gospel

passage today, Christ speaks of one likely obstacle: superfluous riches, being rich in material possessions. While our Lord speaks bluntly of the grave spiritual danger that lies in the possession of an abundance of unnecessary riches, he also makes this consoling statement: “*For God everything is possible.*” A great deal is possible when it comes to being united to Jesus Christ. We ought cast off all feelings of hopelessness in respect to personal sanctity, and replace such feelings with an ardent spiritual optimism. We read in the sixth chapter of the Book of Judges of God’s acceptance of Gideon’s offering: “*Fire sprang from the rock and consumed the meat and unleavened cakes.*” Let us aim to be like that offering.

The ground for our hope is the word of our Lord and the fact that he has provided us with the means that we need. Let us resolutely use those means each day, and with a hope nourished by the thought of God’s plan that we be a total offering to him, let us say: “Now, I begin!”



Wednesday of the twentieth week in Ordinary Time

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Collect O God, who have prepared for those who love you good things which no eye can see, fill our hearts, we pray, with the warmth of your love, so that, loving you in all things and above all things, we may attain your promises, which surpass every human desire. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezekiel 34:1-11; Psalm 22;

Matthew 20:1-16

Jesus said, The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About the third hour he

went out and saw others standing in the market place doing nothing. He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' But

he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last. (Matthew 20:1-16)

The First and the Last I have heard many express puzzlement over this parable. There are those who, sympathizing with those who worked the whole day, think the owner of the vineyard unjust. If he was going to pay the late arrivals one denarius then he should have paid the early arrivals more in proportion. But what is the point of the parable? The point comes at the end, when our Lord says, *“Thus/So (ohutôs) the last will be first, and the first will be last.”* Let us notice that this same conclusion appears immediately prior to this parable, and at the end of an instruction which our Lord gives to his disciples about those who leave all for him and for the Kingdom. He had earlier spoken of certain others who would enter the

Kingdom: such as those who chose celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 19:12), and those who were like little children (19:14). In that same chapter there is also the case of the rich young man who had kept God's commandments. He asked Jesus what more he should do to gain eternal life — which is to say, to gain entry into the Kingdom (Matthew 19:16-26). Our Lord invited him to leave all to follow him. This precious invitation was refused, and our Lord told his disciples that it was hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. With that, Peter pointed to themselves: they had left all to follow him. Our Lord told him that they would sit with him in glory, and that those who leave all for his sake will receive a hundredfold here, and eternal life. “*But*” (as if a warning is being given) “*many (polloi) who are first will be last, and the last will be first*” (Matthew 19:30). In Mark's narration of this scene (10: 28-31), the conclusion is the same: “*many*” (*polloi*) who are first will be last, and who are last will be first (10:31). This conclusion about the first and the last is also given in St Luke (Luke 13:30), where our Lord

warns: strive to enter by the narrow door, for “many” (*polloi*) will try and will not be able, because they will be found to be evildoers (13:27). Whereas people will come from all directions and take their places in the Kingdom of God (13:29). There are those last who will be first, and those first who will be last (13:30). The pivotal question is, what has been your attitude to Jesus Christ? Have you been prepared to love and serve him above all else?

In our Gospel passage today, the point about those last being the first and those first being the last concludes a different teaching. In the previous passage in Matthew and its corresponding passage in Mark, it had to do with the Twelve leaving all to follow Jesus Christ. In Luke 13:30, it relates to those who are (or are not) “evildoers.” In Matthew 20: 1-16 (our passage today), the context is different. It relates to those who labour in the Lord’s vineyard, which is to say, those found at the end of the day to have served God. Just because a person has been working in the vineyard of the Lord all his life does not necessarily mean that he will be found more worthy than

latecomers. Those working for the Lord will certainly receive their due reward, but those who arrive late could be rewarded just as much, for reasons known to the Master alone, who himself is typically bountiful. You cannot yourself judge how worthy you are before God, and certainly you cannot compare yourself with others. The other person, perhaps not at present working as you are now, may well hear the invitation of the Master to repent, and return to labour in the vineyard. Once returned, he may prove to be just as worthy as you — and perhaps even more. How often has this not happened in history! I often think that a very good way of interpreting the point of a parable, or of a maxim from our Lord such as that which concludes our parable, is to think of some example. Augustine was a libertine, a heretic, a sceptic. Due to the unceasing prayers of his mother and the powerful Christian influence of Ambrose, he converted and became one of the greatest saints in the history of the Church, and arguably one of the best intellectual and moral influences in the world. From being last he became first. When Ignatius

Loyola went to Paris to continue his studies, he met a fashionable fellow-student there who assisted him in his efforts to get up to par. His name was Francis Xavier. From time to time Ignatius gently repeated Christ's dictum: *what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul* (Mark 8:36)? Xavier was converted and became one of the greatest missionaries in the history of the Church. From being last he became first. As our Lord said, "*for men this is impossible, but all is possible for God*" (Matthew 19:26).

There are many powerful things in the visible world, both for good and for evil. Man's experience of power and powerful things has even led him to project them in his own mind as deities. But nothing created can compare with the power of God, the creator of all. God can do all things, anything good at all. No matter where we stand in relation to him, we can change by the power of his grace. We can turn away from sin, or we can do much better than we are doing. From being last, we can do better, by the grace of God. Let us seek his grace then, and never fall

away from it. If ever we do, let us repent and come back to him, like late arrivals in the vineyard.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 20:1-16)

“The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner going out at daybreak to hire workers for his vineyard.”

There was once an episode on “Australian Story” (ABC TV, 15-8-2005) which featured a young Australian woman from country NSW who went to Africa to help the poor. She was a Catholic and was by then married to a black African, had two children by him, and was doing wonderful work with her growing school, called St Jude’s. She had a work in life and was doing it well. She loved her work and was inspiring others to join her. One lesson her story teaches us is that our happiness and purpose is deeply connected with our work. In our Gospel today (Matthew 20:1-16), our Lord describes the kingdom of heaven in terms of a landowner going out to find workers for his vineyard. All whom he finds he asks to come to work in

his vineyard. His mercy will be great to those who come, no matter at what point they begin. We are all placed by God in his vineyard, for his vineyard is the whole world of mankind, including those around us whom we are called to serve and for whom we have some responsibility. There is our immediate family, our friends and acquaintances, those whom we serve in our professional work, and those beyond these spheres who call upon us in their need. We have been given a certain amount of time for life, and the best way we can possibly use it is in the service of God and our neighbour. Not only is it the best way, it is the obligatory way — we are *obliged* thus to use the time granted to us.

Let us then fill up our life with good work, done for love of God, and done really well. Let us sanctify our work and make it a worthy offering to God. Let us sanctify ourselves through our work, and let us sanctify others through it.



Thursday of the twentieth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 84 (83):10-11 Turn your eyes, O God, our shield; and look on the face of your anointed one; one day within your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.

Collect O God, who have prepared for those who love you good things which no eye can see, fill our hearts, we pray, with the warmth of your love, so that, loving you in all things and above all things, we may attain your promises, which surpass every human desire. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezekiel 36:23-28; Psalm 50;

Matthew 22:1-14

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they

refused to come. Then he sent some more servants and said, 'Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.' But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, ill-treated them and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.' So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. Friend,' he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless. Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and

gnashing of teeth.’ For many are invited, but few are chosen. (Matthew 22:1-14)

The invitation One of the results of an interest in astronomy is that a person can gain an added sense of the extraordinary character of planet earth, with its multitudinous inhabitants. There have been numerous claims of sightings of Unidentified Flying Objects, with all the opposing counter-claims. One thing that this occasional excitement about UFOs brings out is that there appears to be scarcely any real evidence of life elsewhere in the universe. Further, while in the nature of the case the material universe must have a limit, I do not think scientists are at all certain where the limits lie. The universe is vast to mind-boggling proportions, and it is virtually lifeless. There is one striking exception. In the midst of this gigantic reality we call the universe, there is a speck. We call it planet earth, and on this speck there is a long (yet in galactic terms, extremely short) history of rich, varied and immensely colourful life. Its bejewelled crown is man, teeming in numbers, struggles, achievements and

tragedies. Among the tragedies afflicting man, the most singular and far-reaching is deliberate sin, both Original and personal. The numbers of men and women, all caught up in this tragedy of sin, are beyond calculation. Each person in this surging river of human life possesses his or her own special dignity. Each adds his or her unique lustre to the whole. Our earth is, even to ordinary human observation and reflection, the centre of the universe in terms of value, and man is the centre of the earth. Buried as a speck in the midst of the universe, the earth with its inhabitants is in reality the pinnacle of the universe. For this good reason we usually call our earth “the world.” Despite its being dwarfed, planet earth is in effect “the world,” and the universe which enfolds it, is in effect its servant and satellite. Man is lord both of the “world” and the world’s satellite is the material universe. Yet man is a wounded lord because he is beset by sin, which is his own doing. As we consider the astonishing phenomenon of man and his world, we may ask, is there some key which unlocks its meaning and which embraces the entire

spectacle? There is. The key comes from God, who with the touch of his finger sustains in being all that there is, be it seen or unseen. He has revealed the key.

As just said, the root tragedy at work in all things is the sin of man. It is a tragedy that drags along in its grasp every human person, and through man it affects obscurely the world which is his home. Now, God means to save everyone and everything. That is his intent, and we have it expressed in our Lord's parable today (Matthew 22:1-14). God intends that there be a wedding feast for his divine Son, involving all. This is to be the consummation of everything. Let us not linger over the image of the wedding feast — the general meaning is obvious, in light of the Church's teaching. Heaven with God is mankind's homeland, and the universe will be caught up in it in the fullness of time. That is the wedding feast. The point here is *God's action* to bring each and all to this joyful wedding. There are two movements in the parable — the first one is the outreach to "*those who had been invited.*" Presumably this refers to his chosen people. "*He sent his servants to*

those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.” This refusal was catastrophic for those who refused. The second movement was the invitation to the rest. Then the king said to his servants, “Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.’ So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.” Broadly speaking, the key to the history of the world is the intent of God to bring all mankind to his wedding feast. He chose for himself a people to begin the process, and then formed his Church to take the invitation to all the nations. The pivotal issue for the world is one’s chosen attitude to Jesus Christ. The world and every man and woman in it is meant by God to accept Jesus Christ as Lord. That is the key. That is the all-embracing principle. That is the critical issue for everyone. If we wish to understand the universe, and in particular its crown jewels which is man set within his world, we have it in the saving plan of God for every single man and woman on the face of

this earth, from age to age. The invitation is ever going out, even if at times in very obscure forms. The invitation is imperious. This is the key to the vast mosaic that is the universe.

However, that is looking at it from God's point of view. That is the key that is provided by heaven. There is one other thing, and it comes from man. The invitation has to be accepted, and accepted authentically. We must hear the word of God, and then put it into practice. The guest at the end of the parable had heard the invitation and had come, but had not bothered to don his wedding garment. As a result, he was thrown outside. We must resolve to live and act as sons and daughters of the Kingdom if we wish to be admitted to the wedding feast. Let this, then, be the adventure of every day, to put on the mind of Jesus Christ and live according to his way.

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Second reflection:

Conscience There are various indicators of human progress. There is progress in technology, progress in literature and philosophy, progress in health and material prosperity. However there is an even more fundamental indicator of progress: *progress in the life of the conscience*. This is easier to notice in an individual than in society at large. When conscience is regarded as supreme rather than, say, power or personal convenience, we have evidence of a deeper human progress. But granted this, there is something more important still. It is one thing to be committed to doing one's duty *in general* — this indeed is fundamental. But there must also be progress in one's awareness of *what in the concrete* is really one's specific duty. Of course, a person may know his duty and yet not regard the doing of his duty as supreme, in which case the very basis is not there for the supremacy of conscience in one's life. There is no commitment to the dictates of one's conscience. But on the other hand, if one's regards one's duty as supreme and at the same time one has a wrong

notion of what really is one's duty, the resulting action may have catastrophic consequences. In the Book of Judges, ch.11, we read that "*the spirit of the Lord came upon Jephthah*" to lead the Israelites against the Ammonites, and he was successful. But in his prayer to God for success he made a totally misguided vow — that "*the first person to meet me from the door of my house when I return in triumph .. I will offer him up as a holocaust.*" And "*the Lord delivered them into his power.*" Jephthah was acting on the assumptions of his times and his surroundings. Though he thought he was making a pleasing sacrifice to God, it would have been an abomination in the sight of God. The first person to meet him was his daughter, and he felt bound to honour his vow and sacrificed her life to God. His sense of duty was laudable, but his misguided notion of what was his duty was hopelessly tragic.

We are blessed in that our guide is Christ who lives in the Church as her head. He guides us by means of the Church's teachings. Christ is the truth, and the Church's teachings tell us his truth, for the Church has the promise

of Christ that his divine Spirit will guide her. We must strive to know those teachings so as to know what is our objective duty, and what will be pleasing to God. Let us then be committed to doing what our conscience tells us we should do, and let us be committed to ensuring that our conscience judges aright as to what truly is our duty.



Friday of the twentieth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 84 (83):10-11 Turn your eyes, O God, our shield; and look on the face of your anointed one; one day within your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.

Collect O God, who have prepared for those who love you good things which no eye can see, fill our hearts, we pray, with the warmth of your love, so that, loving you in all things and above all things, we may attain your promises, which surpass every human desire. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 106;

Matthew 22:34-40

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law? Jesus replied: 'Love

the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matthew 22:34-40)

Goodness A fundamental feature of the human being is that he instinctively knows the objective world including his own Self, precisely as objective entities. Animals are instinctively aware of things to a greater or lesser extent, but they are not aware of things precisely as entities with their own objective existence. I mention this to introduce something the human mind is instinctively aware of which is especially fascinating. Included in man’s natural awareness of objective reality is his awareness of the good. Man naturally wants to be *good*, and he naturally — by very nature — knows he *should* be good. This is an act of knowing — an act of his mind by which man grasps something objective. While it involves a deep “feeling,” in the first instance it is something he “knows.” He knows both that he should be good and that

he wants to be good — an obligation and a desire commanding his natural approval. He breaks down as a man if this approval of goodness and his obligation to be good is corrupted and reversed. Further, this basic desire to be good which is perceived as an absolute obligation, is universal. *Everyone* wants to be good, and everyone knows that he is required to be good. It is the basic *law* of mankind, the universal aspiration of his nature. It is the *law* which his nature imposes on him, while leaving his freedom untouched. It is an *absolute* law admitting of no exceptions, whatever be the circumstances. As already said, man is aware of this, and he instinctively and upon reflection judges it to be objective. The *natural law* binding man to strive to be good by doing what is good, and to avoid being evil by not doing what is evil, is the basis of the sanction behind all those more specific laws of morality and a properly-run society. Yet all the while man knows that he can flout this natural law, should he freely so choose. This natural law requiring the choice of the good is the basis and the informing principle of all the particular

judgments of his conscience. It is the fundamental element of man's conscience — what the medieval thinkers called “synderesis” after the Greek for “conscience,” as distinguished from “conscientia” — or the practical conscience.

So then, there is this grand and fundamental fact which is naturally perceived by the human mind. It is that man knows he wants to be good, and he knows he is obligated to seek to be good. This is an objective law his very nature presents before him, not as something subject to his own decision, but as something which imposes itself on him. He is subject to it as to the word of a supreme Lawgiver before whom he has the duty to render obedience. This is a fundamental fact about reality, from which man must start in his life and in his thought. But granted this, what next? The obvious question is, *how* is this law which man naturally and instinctively perceives to be objective and binding on him, and which he knows he yearns to fulfil and in which his truest happiness lies, *to be fulfilled*? What is he to *do*? How can he fulfil this law to

his best limit? That is to say, what does it involve, and how is he to gain the strength to do it? To a point, both these questions are answered by applying the best of his gifts of mind and will to the work. But he is a broken, wounded creature, and there are limits to his power to perceive, and limits to his moral strength. He is mired in his fallen weakness. To this great quandary there comes the announcement from on high that a Redeemer has arrived to show the way and to provide the strength. He is *the Way, the Truth and the Life*. All of this brings us to our Gospel passage today. *Which is the greatest of the commandments?* our Lord is asked. What is the first and most important thing incumbent upon us in the matter of our obligation to be good? Our Lord gives us the answer by invoking the words of the inspired Writings: “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*’ *This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments*” (Matthew 22:34-40). If we

aspire to be good as we are absolutely commanded to, then we must strive to *love God* above all else. We must love him with our whole being. Therein lies human goodness. Secondly, we must *love our neighbour* as ourself.

This summarizes the Law and the Prophets on God's will for man, and it specifies the end-goal for man's natural aspiration and obligation to seek to be good and to avoid evil. *How* do we love God? As our Lord said to his disciples, *If you love me, you will keep my commands*. All of this becomes possible by means of union with Jesus Christ through grace. Man's aspiration to be good, and his obligation to be good is fulfilled in and by union in love with the person of Jesus Christ, made possible by faith and by grace. Let us set out, then — for therein lies our happiness.

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Second reflection:

The divine plan Ruth was sprung from the pagan people of Moab. Leaving her ancestral home of Moab, she accompanied her Jewish mother-in-law Naomi to Bethlehem, the town of Naomi's deceased husband. There she embraced the faith of Naomi: "*Your people shall be my people, and your God my God*" (Ruth: ch.1). As the book of Ruth narrates, she became the great-grandmother of King David, and so was an ancestor of the Messiah. The story of Ruth shows that God is working everywhere, and his plan encompasses the most unlikely materials. Who among the children of Israel would have thought that the Messiah would spring, in part, from the pagan people of Moab! Ruth the Moabitess was a good woman, and an instrument of the divine plan. It does not matter how many or how few talents God has endowed us with. The important thing is that we submit to his plan and be his docile instruments, devoting our whole selves to his will in our ordinary life. A thousand years or more after the passing of the obscure Ruth, the ultimate fruit of her life

made its appearance. That fruit was Jesus the son of David and the Son of God, born at Bethlehem, which was the town where his ancestor Ruth had come to dwell.

God will bless our lives if we are obedient to him. Let us leave the when and the how to him, taking each day as it comes and living it to the full as if it were our last. Let us give each day to God, firm in our faith in his power and his love. If we do this, our life will bear its fruit.



Saturday of the twentieth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 84 (83):10-11 Turn your eyes, O God, our shield; and look on the face of your anointed one; one day within your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.

Collect O God, who have prepared for those who love you good things which no eye can see, fill our hearts, we pray, with the warmth of your love, so that, loving you in all things and above all things, we may attain your promises, which surpass every human desire. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezekiel 43:1-7; Psalm 84;

Matthew 23:1-12

*Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples:
The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practise*

what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the market places and to have men call them 'Rabbi'. But you are not to be called 'Rabbi', for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth 'father', for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called 'teacher', for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. (Matthew 23: 1-12)

Humility At various times I have come across the claim that Jesus is to be understood as a *revolutionary*. We are reminded (a little) of this by the title of the work by John Dominic Crossan (1994), *Jesus: a Revolutionary Biography* — and others could be mentioned. Crossan's

work had the sub-caption, “A startling account of what we can know of the life of Jesus.” Whatever about the particular interpretations of the figure of Jesus Christ offered by these various attempts, one thing that has marked much of the writing about Jesus Christ in the modern era is the effort to get at real history. I do think that the effort to get at the facts of the case is commendable. For example, there are those who abandon the Christian faith because of a hidden yet powerful assumption that whatever is “miraculous” is *fanciful*. The whole of the Gospel story is then gradually viewed as a mere story, a legend fed by the religious imagination. In such cases it is wholesome to gain a sense that the Gospel is a matter of historical *fact*. What becomes problematic is a divorce between the so-called “Jesus of history” and the “Jesus of faith” — meaning the Jesus of objective Christian dogma. If we start talking about Jesus the “revolutionary” (and I am not here commenting on Crossan), then we could have someone other than the real, historical Redeemer of man. By his death, Jesus Christ delivered mankind from

the power of *sin* — those, that is, who accept in faith this deliverance which he effected. The “revolution” he achieved was at the most fundamental level of all: man’s prospects for authentic and heroic goodness. But the “revolutionary Jesus” that has at various times been imagined is of one who profoundly “upset the apple-cart” of the existing religious and social order in Judaism of the time. In the process he lost his life. The existing order of things was too much for him and he died a perennial hero representing the noble conscience of man. The Gospel texts that occasion this view of things are seen to be exemplified in our passage today (Matthew 23: 1-12): the scribes and the Pharisees, respected classes in the Judaism of the time, are condemned by him for their practices and their motives. So our revolutionary Jesus pitted himself against the existing powers, and nobly lost out.

But Jesus Christ did not attack the scribes and Pharisee classes as such. As a matter of fact, he exhorted all to respect and obey them in various respects. They taught legitimately, he said, and possessed a legitimate

authority. What he strongly warned against was their personal living of revealed religion, and their burdensome excesses: *“Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practise what they preach.”* There is no need here to illustrate this from various parts of the four Gospels. What is important is to take to heart the particular point, missed so greatly by many of the Pharisees, and liable to be missed by anyone, which Jesus is here stressing. It was their pride, their vanity, their love of position, their general lack of humility, which was so serious, and which people observing them could unwittingly begin to emulate. They imposed unnecessary religious burdens on people which enhanced their religious power, and they maintained personal practices calculated to impress others with their presumed religious spirit. Their hidden desire for self-aggrandisement had to be exposed, rejected, and condemned. Christ was calling for a return to the authentic

practice of revealed religion which, importantly, was to be based on the most important thing of all — the virtue of humility. Humility! To become a humble person after the manner of Jesus Christ is the grandest goal of all. It will not come naturally. It requires a sustained, life-long struggle in an opposite direction from that pursued by many (though not all) of the legitimate spiritual leaders of the people in our Lord's own day. They walked the path of pride and vanity. Christ's path is that of meekness and humility. This, indeed, could be said to be the most striking virtue of the heart of Jesus Christ. He was utterly and profoundly humble. *Come to me*, he said, *all you who labour. Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls.* Among the many things the disciple of Jesus Christ must learn from his Master, one of the most important is *humility*.

Let every person seek to be humble — humble in service — after the manner of Jesus Christ. Let us study him. How are we to acquire this virtue? Christ gives us the key: *"The greater among you will be your servant."* A

constant spirit of genuine service deepens the virtue of humility. Christ is precisely the *Suffering Servant*, long predicted. He came *to serve and not to be served*. We must not “elevate” ourselves above others, expecting them to serve us: “*whoever elevates himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be elevated*” (Matthew 23:12). If there is anything we must gain in life, it is especially the virtue of Christian humility.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 23: 1-12)

“Anyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and anyone who humbles himself will be exalted.” Among the species of the animal kingdom, animals seek dominance over one another. Among dogs there is usually one that insists on being the ‘top dog’. At least this shows that the effort to achieve superiority over others cannot be regarded as an especially human trait, for it also characterises the animal world. Yet the desire for dominance and exaltation over others is one of the most

powerful and pervasive forces in human history: Christ came to show a diametrically opposite way to be human and, indeed, to be exalted. It is the way of humility. *Though he was equal to God, St Paul points out, he did not cling to that but became as men are, and humbler still.* Thus he was raised on high, higher than all. Our Lord said that the one who wants to be first, *let him be last and the servant of all, for the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for the many.* In our Gospel today (Matthew 23:1-12), Our Lord tells the people and his disciples that “*the greatest among you must be your servant. Anyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and anyone who humbles himself will be exalted.*”

Let us make that our path in life in all our dealings with God and with others.



Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 86 (85):1-3 Turn your ear, O Lord, and answer me; save the servant who trusts in you, my God. Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I cry to you all the day long.

Collect O God, who cause the minds of the faithful to unite in a single purpose, grant your people to love what you command and to desire what you promise, that, amid the uncertainties of this world, our hearts may be fixed on that place where true gladness is found. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 22:19-23; Psalm 138:1-3, 6, 8;

Romans 11:33-36; Matthew 16:13-20

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, Who do people say the Son of Man is? They replied, Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.

But what about you? he asked. Who do you say I am? Simon Peter answered, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus replied, Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. (Matthew 16:13-20)

Who Jesus is Our Gospel passage today records the pivotal question on which turns the entire Gospel. John tells us that he wrote his Gospel to show that Jesus is *the Christ, the Son of the living God*, and that believing this we might find life in his name. The question, then, of who Jesus is, is fundamental. John the Baptist had formally declared for Jesus, while being soon eclipsed by him. While our Lord's miracles and preaching had the Kingdom of God as its object, the country was a-buzz with talk of the

prophet of Galilee himself. It was manifest that he himself was central to the Kingdom, and, to say the very least, its outstanding figure. The natural question was, who was this Jesus of Nazareth? Our passage today (Matthew 16:13 20) shows that, as far as our Lord himself was concerned, this was the critical question, for the simple reason that he did not ignore it, but himself asked it of his disciples. Indeed, the question about himself, on the lips of so many, was central to that about which our Lord had been preaching — the Kingdom of Heaven. But now, with our scene today, the centre of gravity shifts in a formal sense from “the Kingdom” to Jesus himself, and something further is introduced of maximum importance to the Kingdom — Christ’s Church. But it all pivots on the question of *who Jesus is*. As a matter of fact, our Lord would go to his death, bearing the sins of the world, precisely because of this question. He bore witness before the Sanhedrin to who he was, and he was condemned to death for it. The question of who Jesus is was fundamental to the Kingdom. So our Lord begins his question by asking, “*Who do people*

say the Son of Man is?" The answer he received from them is typical of the answer that has always been forthcoming. *"They replied, Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."* He is a great religious leader, a man of God and of the highest probity. There is, incidentally, a curious feature of this moral fame of Jesus Christ. It is that he claimed to be divine. But how can his moral worth be accepted if he propagated a massive lie about himself, or alternatively, a massive fantasy about himself? It would seem that if one accepts his moral stature, one ought accept his personal claims. But this conclusion is not drawn.

The answer which our Lord wanted to hear from his disciples, and which he approved of as coming ultimately from his heavenly Father when he heard it, was unique. *"You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."* Our Lord was no ordinary prophet. He was the one long predicted who would do for man all that God had intended and promised. More still, he was God's own Son, equal to God himself. As Simon showed, more than ordinary human

light is needed to grasp who our Lord really is and what is his real work. This light was given to Simon. Simon Peter did not, and could not, work out by his own natural lights who Jesus really was. Insight into Jesus came to him as a gift from above, for our Lord said that “*flesh and blood did not reveal this to you but my Father in heaven.*” Then our Lord declared him to be the rock on which he would build his Church, the one who would bear the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. That Kingdom is found in Jesus and in union with him. The Church, as built on Peter, would be the means to gain union with Jesus in whom is found every heavenly blessing. Ultimately, then, we see in our Gospel scene two categories of people. The first are the people who made up their own minds about Jesus and all he was doing, going simply by their own private judgement alone. They got as far as they could have without the grace of God. Their view of Jesus fell far short of the reality: that he was yet another great prophet. The other category of people, we could say, is represented by Simon Peter. They view Jesus and what he has revealed by the light that

comes from divine faith, after the manner of Peter himself. What Peter uttered about our Lord did not come to him from flesh and blood but, as our Lord pointed out, from the Father in heaven. His faith was a divine gift. We who are disciples of our Lord take our cue from Peter, and by the light of that faith, we choose to be in his company. We do not consider our Lord simply by the light of our own natural powers. Rather, we look on Jesus and his revelation with the light that comes from above, but uttered in each generation to the Church's members by Peter and his successors, and those who teach in union with him.

In our Christian life, let us be distinguished by the obedience of faith, and not merely by what we can work out for ourselves. That faith is a gift from above enabling us to believe in our Lord and therefore in his word. This word of our Lord continues to be uttered from generation to generation within the Church by those he has appointed to speak in his name. Who are they? They are Peter and his successors, and those who speak in union with Peter's successor. Let us then be filled with this truly Catholic

spirit, building our lives on the word of Christ as it comes to us in this way, nourishing our lives constantly from this source.



Monday of the twenty-first week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 86 (85):1-3 Turn your ear, O Lord, and answer me; save the servant who trusts in you, my God. Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I cry to you all the day long.

Collect O God, who cause the minds of the faithful to unite in a single purpose, grant your people to love what you command and to desire what you promise, that, amid the uncertainties of this world, our hearts may be fixed on that place where true gladness is found. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Thessalonians 1:1-5.11-12; Psalm 95;
Matthew 23:13-22

Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You lock the Kingdom of heaven before men. You do not enter yourselves, nor do you allow entrance to those trying to

enter. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You traverse sea and land to make one convert, and when that happens you make him a child of Gehenna twice as much as yourselves. “Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If one swears by the temple, it means nothing, but if one swears by the gold of the temple, one is obligated.’ Blind fools, which is greater, the gold, or the temple that made the gold sacred? And you say, ‘If one swears by the altar, it means nothing, but if one swears by the gift on the altar, one is obligated.’ You blind ones, which is greater, the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? One who swears by the altar swears by it and all that is upon it; one who swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it; one who swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who is seated on it.” (Matthew 23:13-22)

Blindness The issue of responsibility for wrongdoing is one of the most fundamental in human life. A person does something that is wrong, and he claims that something or someone *else caused him* to do it. At the beginning, Adam and Eve ate of the tree in the middle of

the garden, which God had forbidden them to do (Genesis 3:3). Adam blamed Eve — “*the woman whom you put here with me*” (3:12). Implicitly he was blaming God himself for his — Adam’s — wrongdoing. Eve blamed the Serpent (3:13) who “*tricked*” her. After all — perhaps insinuating God’s responsibility — God had permitted the Serpent to be in the Garden! The point is, though, that the Man and the Woman claim not to have truly seen nor meant what they had done. The fact is that the woman was tricked, and the fact is that the man was led by the woman, but they were still condemned because ultimately each was responsible: “*Because you have done this you shall be banned....*” (Genesis 3:14). There are variations of this moral “blindness” to personal responsibility. As Jesus hung on the Cross at Calvary, as the people stood there watching and the leaders kept jeering at him, he prayed, “*Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing*” (Luke 23:34). They were “blind” but still, they were responsible — otherwise there would be no purpose in Christ’s prayer for their *pardon*. When Peter, in John’s company, healed

the cripple at the Temple, he said to the crowds that “*I know, my brothers, that you acted out of ignorance, just as your leaders did*” in putting Jesus to death (Acts 3:17). So they were blind to what they were doing, but it was a culpable blindness, because Peter immediately exhorts them to *repent*. If they were not responsible for their blindness, there would be no reason for repentance. If they repented, their *sins* would be wiped away (3:19). In our Gospel today (Matthew 23:13-22), our Lord accuses at least some of the scribes and Pharisees, in the presence of his disciples and the crowds, of hypocrisy: “*Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites*” (Matthew 13:15). They were in sin, while meaning to appear holy. Significantly, they were blind: “*Woe to you, blind guides*” (13:16). He calls them “*fools and blind*” — indicating their loss of spiritual sight. “*How blind you are!*” he says (13:19) — but he proceeds to pronounce a woe upon them: “*Woe to you!*” (13: 23).

All this is to say that one can be blind to one’s wrongdoing, but entirely culpable for one’s blindness.

Adam and Eve were condemned for doing what they did, though they claimed to be tricked by the influences acting upon them — influences, they insinuated, which God had allowed to be there. Christ himself says that the scribes and Pharisees were blind to the harm and foolishness of their teaching (they were “blind guides”). But they were culpably so — he pronounced a woe upon them. What we are reminded of here is the basic moral stand which is at the root of one’s decision-making and one’s moral attitudes. A good man will see that this or that is good, and that something else is bad. A bad man’s view of things will be in accord with his moral character. While one can make reasonable mistakes, it is nevertheless possible to think something to be good which is in fact bad, precisely because of one’s own moral corruption. We decide as a result of our fundamental starting points. Our particular choices and moral attitudes are the fruit of where we are coming from. There is a real sense that what we “see” and how we “judge,” in moral and spiritual matters, is governed by the moral character we possess. Our

particular moral decisions will be profoundly affected by our basic moral positions. These positions can be so fundamental that they are out of our own sight, but known to God who observes us to the core. Our Lord said, *Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.* The moral state of one's heart governs what one can see and the moral judgments one makes. So there are really two levels of responsibility, each intimately involved with the other, but distinguishable. There are the particular moral decisions and judgments one makes — such as the decision to perform some good or evil act — and there is the state of mind and heart from which this flows. While the particular choices themselves over time determine our moral character, in a sense they also come out of our moral character. Our state of heart, our moral character, is the product of our choices and is the source of our choices. The scribes and Pharisees our Lord was here addressing were blind because they were consistently hypocritical.

Let us turn to God and ask that his grace do its powerful work in our souls. Let us understand that if one's

heart is morally corrupt, however gradually or even suddenly this might have come to be, then one's moral vision will be profoundly affected. One can become culpably blind. This lack of moral sight and judgment can itself be culpable because one's inner moral corruption is one's own responsibility. Those in our Gospel passage whom our Lord accused of being blind had become so because, obscurely, they had chosen the path of darkness. Let us ask God to lay down in our hearts the right foundations and the grace to act in accord with them.

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Second reflection:

False gods The Thessalonians to whom St Paul wrote had been followers of other gods, but had broken with them when they “*were converted to God and became servants of the real, living God.*” What, we may ask ourselves, are in fact our ultimate reference points in the

range of activities and interests that make up our lives? What do we look to as the principle and sanction of all we think, say and do? Is it money, fame, influence, luxury? It should be the “real, living God”. In all that make up our lives, down to all their details, we ought be God’s “servants” and his alone.

Let us be honest with ourselves: undoubtedly there are various forms of “idolatry” in our life, from which we need to be converted. Let us begin again and again every day, renewing our life in Christ, identifying in our daily examination of conscience those things we need to break from in order to become “*servants of the real, living God*” in everything.



Tuesday of the twenty-first week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 86 (85):1-3 Turn your ear, O Lord, and answer me; save the servant who trusts in you, my God. Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I cry to you all the day long.

Collect O God, who cause the minds of the faithful to unite in a single purpose, grant your people to love what you command and to desire what you promise, that, amid the uncertainties of this world, our hearts may be fixed on that place where true gladness is found. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3.14-17; Psalm 95;
Matthew 23:23-26

Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices- mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law-

justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practised the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. (Matthew 23:23-26)

The gnat and the camel I suspect that one of the distinctive features of Revealed Religion, if compared with natural religion (as in the other religions of man) is that it places squarely before the ordinary practitioner the ideal of moral and spiritual *perfection*. This is perhaps not absolutely unique to the Judaeo-Christian spiritual tradition, but it is a most notable feature. High personal holiness and the rejection of sin is the calling addressed to each of the faithful. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, God makes a simple demand: “*you shall make and keep yourselves holy, because I am holy you shall be holy, because I am holy*” (Leviticus 11: 44-45). The

command is later repeated in a different form: “*To me, therefore, you shall be sacred; for I, the Lord am sacred*” (Leviticus 20:26). In the New Testament, 1 Peter reiterates this Old Testament command: “*as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct, because it has been written, You shall be holy because I am holy*” (1 Peter 1: 15-16). In the Gospel, our Lord is explicit on the matter: “*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect*” — and it is clear from the context in the Sermon on the Mount that this perfection is above all a perfection of love (Matthew 5: 43-48). So it is that persons young and old and in all kinds of circumstances, in hearing the call of Jesus Christ to follow him, hear the call to be holy. The essence of the Christian call is to be a *saint*, provided this is properly understood — and it requires a wise guide to give to the neophyte this correct understanding. But there is this real danger that, having heard such a magnificent call answering so exactly to the aspiration of each person’s nature to be good, it will remain a generality. That is to say, one can be possessed of the ringing and exhilarating

aspiration to holiness, and yet not get down to the nitty-gritty of its daily detail. A person who, moved by grace, yearns for the moral and spiritual perfection of love, must determine on daily attainable goals. He must observe where his true battle lies in his daily situation, exactly where he is prone to refuse to love, and what precisely in practical terms he needs to be working on. He needs a practical plan of daily life if he is ever going to move his moral campaign forward to victory.

The serious Christian, and indeed any person serious about living a religious life, must have a practical, detailed plan, a concrete strategy of action which, if followed, can be expected to advance his prospects for spiritual perfection. Vague generalities such as “I want to be holy,” “I wish to be a saint,” are a great advance on what might border on mediocrity, but they are of themselves utterly insufficient. They must become practical. This brings us to our Gospel passage today (Matthew 23: 23 26), for one thing we ought to note is that Christ did not generally attack what we might call the practical plan of life of the

scribes and Pharisee classes. He notes that “*You give a tenth of your spices- mint, dill and cummin.*” That was one of their practices — they gave a tenth to God of certain things they had, their “spices.” There was nothing wrong with this, indeed our Lord says in this passage that this ought not be neglected: “*those (things you ought) not to leave off*” (Matthew 23:23). So the scribes and Pharisees had their practices in place, and this is something that many religious people with ideals actually fail to do. But these scribes and Pharisees fell into the opposite error. They maintained their practices and lost the true ideals. The authentic goal of holiness involving the “*weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith*” (23:23) had been lost (among some of the Pharisees), and replaced by hidden goals of self-aggrandisement and spiritual vanity. Things were done to attract the admiration of men and practices imposed to maintain spiritual hegemony. It was this which our Lord attacked, for it corrupted the entire religious life of a person and made of him a “hypocrite.” Further, it could become influential in the sense that others

could be drawn to emulate it. It gradually made them blind. They missed the wood for the trees, and while straining out gnats from their drink, they ended up swallowing a camel — as our Lord, in typical Hebraic and perhaps amusing hyperbole, stated so forcefully. It reminds us that once we have settled the matter of a practical regime of religious living, we must beware of the next danger. The danger is of allowing our religious practices to become empty of their true intent. They can become sterile, with little fire, or gradually transformed into self-serving means of spiritual enhancement before the gaze of men.

Let us every day cast our whole selves into the care of God our almighty Father, his divine Son our Brother and Redeemer, and the Divine Spirit our Guide and Sanctifier. Especially ought we ask the grace of the Holy Spirit to guide our minds and inflame our hearts, assisting us to aim high and to be severely practical. Let us ask the constant intercession of the saints who have arrived at the destination of personal sanctity, especially of Mary our

heavenly mother, the perfect Christian, the perfect creature. Sanctity is overwhelmingly the work of grace, but we must give to the work our whole-hearted co-operation.

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Second reflection:

Work The thought of St Paul working under severe difficulties — so manifest in the New Testament — leads us to reflect on our own work. We tend to think that in order to draw close to God and remain in union with him we must turn away from our work in order to find God. Work tends to be imagined as a distraction from God. Now of course we must interrupt our life of work with times of exclusive prayer, if we hope to spend our whole life (of work) prayerfully. But we also have our work to do, and normally a lot of work. The work we have should be done constantly for God, and in his presence. We ought take specific steps to remind ourselves that God is present

and all we are doing is for him. For this reason our work ought to be done well as a constant offering to him. Far from being a distraction from God, it is in and through our work that we can keep close to God and grow ever closer to him.

We must learn to sanctify our work and make it a holy offering to him, something well done in his sight. In sanctifying it we will sanctify ourselves, and by the service to others that is our work we shall be able to contribute towards their sanctification.



Wednesday of the twenty-first week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 86 (85):1-3 Turn your ear, O Lord, and answer me; save the servant who trusts in you, my God. Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I cry to you all the day long.

Collect O God, who cause the minds of the faithful to unite in a single purpose, grant your people to love what you command and to desire what you promise, that, amid the uncertainties of this world, our hearts may be fixed on that place where true gladness is found. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 Thessalonians 3:6-10, 16-18;

Psalm 128:1-2, 4-5; Matthew 23:27-32

Jesus said, Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In

the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers! (Matthew 23:27-32)

The heart One of the plainest facts of archaeology, history and anthropology is that the human race has been broadly religious. It is no surprise to the (secular) archaeologist to discover plenty of evidence of religious institutions, ritual and myth. He expects to find this, and if there are no obvious explanations for the significance of a find in some dig, he will probably interpret the find as a religious discovery. Of course, the secular, agnostic or atheistic archaeologist, while being

respectful of the objects of his discipline, will also think to himself that such items of religion are, well, ultimately delusory. Still, the point here is that he and all know that religion has been an immemorial facet of human society and culture. Religion is natural to man, and even if there is not a formal and explicit acknowledgment of a divine being as such (as in Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism), there are often substitutes. And what has “religion” amounted to? It has certainly involved ritual, numerous myths that express the perceptions of the society, and often a machinery of officers and procedures that organize, express and educate the religious aspirations of the people. Getting to the heart of the matter, though, what has religion *meant* in its essence? There have been numerous theories and analyses. Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) famously proposed his description of man’s experience of the “numen”: it is the experience of a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. As *mysterium*, the numinous is “wholly other”, i.e., entirely different from anything we experience in ordinary life. As *tremendum* it evokes terror because it presents itself as

overwhelming power. The numinous also presents itself as *fascinans*, as merciful and gracious. These are useful suggestions as to natural religion — I myself think Otto failed to stress sufficiently the intimations of the natural conscience. Be that as it may, there are two things that may be said about natural religion (that is, religion which is natural to man and not formally revealed). It is that *love by* the deity and *love for* the deity is not notable, and secondly, there is little stress on *perfection* in religion, especially interior religion. But in Revealed Religion, the case is very different.

When Jesus Christ was asked what is the greatest commandment of the Law, he was being asked what was the most important thing in the practice of Revealed Religion — its essence and distinguishing component. He answered instantly, quoting the Torah (that is, the Books of Moses). The greatest thing was *to love*. Intimately connected with this was the obligation to do this *perfectly*. We read that “*a lawyer asked him a question, to test him. Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law? And*

he said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets’ (Matthew 22: 35-40). Our Lord was quoting the Torah (Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18). But all this was founded on God’s love for his people, as was revealed so clearly to Moses on the Mount. *“The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty’”* (Exodus 34:6). Religion involved living after the pattern of God himself: *“Be holy, says the Lord, for I am holy”* (Leviticus 11:44, recalled in 1 Peter 1:16). Religion, then, was to be above all (though not exclusively) a thing of the heart. The heart of man was to be filled with love for God and for neighbour. Love was the essence of true religion just as it was the essence of the life of God. It

was to be lived to perfection: man was to love God with all his strength and his neighbour as himself. The ever-present danger is that this true religion of the heart can be forgotten. If present it can be lived in but a mediocre way. It can even die — which brings us to our Gospel today (Matthew 23:27-32), in which our Lord states, “*Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean.*”

When it comes to the life of religion, the primary attention we must give is to what is going on in our *hearts*. It is a religion of the heart, being filled more and more with *love*, love for God and neighbour, that must pervade our life and the external practice of our faith. Let us not misunderstand this: the external practice of the Christian faith is of the utmost importance. There is nothing more important in the world than the Mass, which is the Sacrifice of Calvary made present. Our participation in it is of the utmost importance. But all that God has given —

Christ and his Church and Sacraments, reveal and express the *love* of God — and they summon us to *love* in return, and to love *at its best*. Let us not allow our religion to become mediocre and die.



Thursday of the twenty-first week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 86 (85):1-3 Turn your ear, O Lord, and answer me; save the servant who trusts in you, my God. Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I cry to you all the day long.

Collect O God, who cause the minds of the faithful to unite in a single purpose, grant your people to love what you command and to desire what you promise, that, amid the uncertainties of this world, our hearts may be fixed on that place where true gladness is found. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; Psalm 144;

Matthew 24:42-51

Jesus said to his disciples: “Stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come. Be sure of this: if the master of the house had known the hour of night when the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake

and not let his house be broken into. So too, you also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come. “Who, then, is the faithful and prudent servant, whom the master has put in charge of his household to distribute to them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master on his arrival finds doing so. Amen, I say to you, he will put him in charge of all his property. But if that wicked servant says to himself, ‘My master is long delayed,’ and begins to beat his fellow servants, and eat and drink with drunkards, the servant’s master will come on an unexpected day and at an unknown hour and will punish him severely and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.” (Matthew 24:42-51)

The last things There is no prophet or teacher of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, who speaks so much as does Jesus Christ, on the reward or punishment of the Afterlife. While the paganism of classical times certainly allowed for an Afterlife, its depiction of it was generally shadowy. The idea of a Judgment on the soul presented a

mixed picture. However, it seems that while the Egyptians did not imagine a Judgment as occurring collectively at the end of time, a Judgment was envisioned for each person after his or her death. After death each person would face a divine tribunal and either be rescued from death or condemned to a final death. The Old Testament speaks constantly of God rewarding the good and punishing the bad, and this will come both in this life and at the end. But it is Christ who especially speaks of the Judgment of God on the individual after death, and he frequently reminds his hearers of Hell. So it is in our Gospel passage today, in which the “wicked servant” who beats his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards will be assigned “*a place with the hypocrites, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth*” (Matthew 24:51). So there is “*a place*” where “*there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.*” The “hypocrites” will be there, as will those who “beat” their underlings and cavort with “drunkards,” the dissolute. Hell and the loss of God is so real that it drew from God the extraordinary step of the Incarnation and the Atonement,

involving horrific sufferings for the incarnate Son of God. The doctrine of Hell is serious. I have seen the devils depicted as mischievous imps — in other words, the terrible place or state of Hell is trivialized. The fact is that Time carries us all along at a fast pace. We cannot slow it down, nor can we alight from it. We are bound by nature to remain aboard. Nor do we have a choice as to our destination which is death, just as we had no choice in entering the world at conception and birth. Once aboard, we must face the end. That end will most assuredly come, and it involves death and the judgment of God. Following that judgment there will be an eternity of misery or an eternity of bliss. In our Gospel today (Matthew 24:42-51) our Lord refers to the misery: it will be “*a place.. where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.*”

What our Lord especially wishes to emphasize in his parable today is that we are all on a knife-edge. I remember many years ago following the career of Michael Holmes à Court who was born in 1937 in Johannesburg, South Africa. He subsequently lived in Perth, Western

Australia and had striking success as an entrepreneur. I think he was the first Australian businessman to be worth over a billion dollars. He was a tremendous corporate raider during the 1980s, and built up his financial empire from virtually nothing. He gained diversified resources and a media group with an estimated worth at the time of about \$2 billion. His flagship was “Bell Resources” and at the time shareholders in the company enjoyed immense investment growth. He seemed to be sailing from strength to strength, and I remember his financial acumen drew recognition from the Catholic commentator Bob Santamaria in one of his columns. But what happened? In his early fifties he suddenly died of a heart attack, and that was the end. He was cremated. All that was left of him was a handful of ashes, and his vast estate was divided among his wife and four children. His soul had gone before the divine Judge — as the soul of every man and woman in human history must. The point here, though, is that his end came without warning. Time carries us all along to our destination, and in his case the destination

arrived suddenly and without warning. He had no premonition, no warning, nor did anyone else have a warning of his demise. Our Lord tells us to be ever ready. *“Stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come. Be sure of this: if the master of the house had known the hour of night when the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and not let his house be broken into. So too, you also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come.”* Years ago, the prominent Australian author and academic, Donald Horne — the author of the well-known book, *The Lucky Country* (1964), was interviewed. He was asked — for he was known to be religiously agnostic — what he expected in regard to life after death. He replied that he had the practice of never looking too far ahead, but rather of dealing with life as it lay immediately before him. This, he thought, was the realistic thing to do in all matters, including in the matter of the Afterlife. He forgot that death could be *immediately before him*. What then?

Let us take to heart the words of Jesus Christ, the second divine Person of the Blessed Trinity, Son of God made man, our Redeemer and our Brother. He warns us that at the end of life there will be the judgment of God, and that life can end at any point and without warning. So, we must at every moment stand ready for the coming of the Son of Man. We ought so live in the present moment, and in the present day, that were it to be our last, we would be ready. This means that at every point we place ourselves in the merciful hand of God, striving to do his will, repentant for our sins, and grateful for the gift of life. Let us keep before us the Last Things we must face.

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Second reflection:

Love In one of his Letters (1 Thessalonians) St Paul prays that the *Lord will increase the love* of the Thessalonians one for the other. That is a grace we ought pray for: an increase in love. St Paul loved greatly, and his prayer was that love would abound in the life of the individual Christian and of the Church. We are reminded that the Christian religion is a religion of the heart, and its effect is to produce holiness of the heart.

We ought strive to bring to all our thoughts, words and actions a heart progressively filled with Christian love, knowing that our hearts are constantly before the gaze of God.



Friday of the twenty-first week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 86 (85):1-3 Turn your ear, O Lord, and answer me; save the servant who trusts in you, my God. Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I cry to you all the day long.

Collect O God, who cause the minds of the faithful to unite in a single purpose, grant your people to love what you command and to desire what you promise, that, amid the uncertainties of this world, our hearts may be fixed on that place where true gladness is found. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 1:17-25; Psalm 32;

Matthew 25:1-13

Jesus told his disciples this parable: “The Kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones, when taking

their lamps, brought no oil with them, but the wise brought flasks of oil with their lamps. Since the bridegroom was long delayed, they all became drowsy and fell asleep. At midnight, there was a cry, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' Then all those virgins got up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise ones replied, 'No, for there may not be enough for us and you. Go instead to the merchants and buy some for yourselves.' While they went off to buy it, the bridegroom came and those who were ready went into the wedding feast with him. Then the door was locked. Afterwards the other virgins came and said, 'Lord, Lord, open the door for us!' But he said in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, I do not know you.' Therefore, stay awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.' (Matthew 25:1-13)

Being ready Alexander the Great had 2000 survivors of his siege of Tyre crucified along the shores of the Mediterranean. During the period between the Greek and Roman control of Palestine, the Jewish ruler Alexander

Jannaeus crucified 800 Pharisees who opposed him at Bethome. Six thousand followers of Spartacus were crucified as a result of their insurrection (about 72 BC). During the time of Caligula — AD 37-41 — Jews were tortured and crucified in the amphitheatre to entertain the inhabitants of Alexandria. These are instances of the sudden wheels of fortune snuffing out numerous lives, and with great cruelty. Mother Nature (as it is called) can be equally devastating. The Black Death was one of the greatest and most unexpected catastrophes in human history. The plague peaked in Europe between 1348 and 1350. It may have started in China, reaching the Crimea by 1346. From there, probably carried by rats on merchant ships, it spread throughout the Mediterranean and Europe. It is estimated to have killed something approaching half of Europe's population, and to have reduced the population of the world by anything up to 75 million persons. Again, in this we have an example of lives suddenly being swept away in astonishing proportions — and no-one knew the day or the hour such a thing would come. Or again, it

would be impossible to calculate the numbers of lives lost in war in the history of the world. The past century alone, since the First World War of 1914-1918, has seen enormous numbers of persons swept into the oblivion of death. However much we may endeavour to ensure our health and safety, the life of man is essentially precarious, and this has to be understood. Absolutely speaking, we cannot know either the day or the hour. A whole country can be vulnerable. No-one in the world expected the earthquake of the Pacific coast of To-hoku (Japan), at a magnitude of 9.0, on March 11, 2011. It was the most powerful known earthquake to have hit Japan, and one of the five most powerful earthquakes in the world overall since modern record keeping began in 1900. Great numbers of lives were swept away and property was swallowed up in the cataclysm. No-one knew the day or the hour.

All this is to say that the suddenness with which things of utmost seriousness can come upon us in life is plain to ordinary observation and reflection. The course of

the world is not subject to man's full control, and to a point he himself is subject to the course of the world. It does not need the word of Jesus Christ as expressed in our parable today, to appreciate the vulnerability and transience of life. What our Lord does especially speak of, and repeat his revelation of, is the real meaning of the end of human life, however suddenly this may come. The real point of human life coming to its end is that it involves the coming of Jesus Christ. He it is who comes to us when death comes. Every person who dies is brought before Christ who is then his Judge. Through life, the coming of Jesus Christ as Judge of mankind may appear to be a long way off, but come he assuredly will: *"Since the bridegroom was long delayed, they all became drowsy and fell asleep. At midnight, there was a cry, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!'"* This is the meaning of death, and ordinary reflection ought bring home that death can come suddenly to the individual and to vast numbers. What is a revelation, and which is beyond ordinary observation and reflection, is that death pre-eminently involves being brought before Jesus

Christ. He is the Bridegroom who has given himself for his Bride the Church — meaning those who accept him and his teaching in faith, be it explicit or implicit. He is the Saviour of mankind, the Bridegroom. All men will die, and this means that all will be brought before the judgment of Christ the Bridegroom of the Church and of our souls. So we must stand ready! While we cannot prevent the mishap of death, we can prepare for what it involves. We can be ever ready, were we suddenly to be taken from the visible scene. Preparation for this involves being constantly prepared for our inevitable meeting with Christ the Bridegroom of the Church, and the Judge of mankind. At any point the Bridegroom may arrive. If we are not ready for his arrival, we shall be like the foolish virgins — and the event may find us refused admittance to the wedding feast.

This is the point of our parable today (Matthew 25:1-13), and it is a matter of life and death — in eternity. In Shakespeare's play, the ghost of Hamlet's father bewailed his own murder when he was unprepared for his

appearance before the divine Judge. What must we do, then? We must resolve to live constantly in the presence of the Bridegroom of our souls, Jesus Christ. As in the parable, let us be wise. Every day let us live in Christ's presence, striving to do his will. Christ comes to us constantly in grace, and the last of his comings is our death, be it somewhat predictable (as in some illness) or be it sudden. Whatever be our circumstances, let us always stand ready with our lamps lit. Let us not be foolish. Let us not, as we might say, be "caught napping."

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Second reflection: (Matthew 25: 1-13)

“So stay awake, because you do not know either the day or the hour.” ‘Time is short, eternity long’, Cardinal Newman wrote at the end of his landmark work, *The Development of Christian Doctrine*. Even in the discipline of philosophy, one of the very fascinating and fundamental questions is the nature of Time. It is a fundamental consideration, because the reality of our direct experience is essentially temporal. It is necessarily caught up in time. It is ever changing. The great German philosopher Martin Heidegger gave to his master work the title: *Being and Time*. But Time is not just an absorbing philosophical question. It is a very practical and religious one. Cardinal Newman once wrote that the idea of a judgment as involved in the feeling of conscience is the first principle of religion (February 21, 1875). That is to say, the thought of a judgment that the guilty conscience naturally prompts will normally turn man to God and religion. But of course, involved in this thought of a judgment is the thought of Time, for we know that God’s

judgment can come at any point. Our life is constantly drawing towards its end, and when our life ends there is the judgment of God. Our Lord in his parable today (Matthew 25:1-13) points out that at any moment the bridegroom can come.

So we must “*stay awake; because you do not know either the day or the hour.*” It means using up our time for the work God has given us to do, and not letting Time just fritter away. Time is given to us to get our God given work done. That work, as St Paul explains is that of making progress in personal holiness. “*What God wants is for you all to be holy*” (1 Thessalonians 4:1-8).



Saturday of the twenty-first week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 86 (85):1-3 Turn your ear, O Lord, and answer me; save the servant who trusts in you, my God. Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I cry to you all the day long.

Collect O God, who cause the minds of the faithful to unite in a single purpose, grant your people to love what you command and to desire what you promise, that, amid the uncertainties of this world, our hearts may be fixed on that place where true gladness is found. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 1:26-31; Psalm 32;

Matthew 25:14-30

Jesus told his disciples this parable: A man going on a journey called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his

ability. Then he went on his journey. The man who had received the five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.' His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' The man with the two talents also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.' His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' Then the man who had received the one talent came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man,

harvesting where you have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’ His master replied, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. ‘Take the talent from him and give it to the one who has the ten talents. For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’
(Matthew 25:14-30)

The one-talent man There is a great range of views among historians as to the principal forces that shape history. Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) published his celebrated three-volume work, ***The French Revolution***, in the late 1830s in which he stressed the importance of

“heroes.” For Carlyle, chaotic events of which the French Revolution was an archetype, require “heroes” to take charge. He was reacting against a view that stressed economic and practical factors (of which the *Das Kapital* of Marx was a slightly later expression). Only dynamic individuals could direct the spiritual energies of history effectively. Heroic human action was critical for the betterment of society. Charles Dickens used Carlyle’s French Revolution as a major source for his portrayal of events in his *Tale of Two Cities*. Carlyle’s view of the importance of heroic leadership found expression in his further book (based on a series of lectures) *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* in which he considered different kinds of heroes: Cromwell, Bonaparte, Shakespeare, Dante, John Knox, Luther and Muhammad. I tend to think that for those who do not allow for material forces and laws to be the determinants of history, Carlyle’s view is the natural and obvious one. History commonly thought to be shaped by heroic leaders, for good or ill, and those with exceptional gifts have the responsibility to put

them to use. However, that having been said, this stress on the “hero” can be disputed, or qualified. It can surely be argued that it is the mass of little people, made up of individuals exercising their power of choice, which is the real shaper of the world. It is critical for mankind that the ordinary person make of his humdrum life a thing of grandeur by exercising in heroic manner his unnoticed gifts in his unremarkable circumstances. The ordinary person who is extraordinarily good may appear to have limited impact on the world — but he certainly shows the way for the countless other ordinary persons who make up 99% of humanity. If each and all had the ambition of being good, how good the world would be!

Chapter 25 of St Matthew’s Gospel is one of the most famous in the Gospels for the simple fact that it contains our Lord’s panoramic description of the General Judgment of all the nations at the end of time. It goes for sixteen verses, and stresses the common Judgment by God on all mankind and every member of it, an eternity in Heaven or Hell. It also stresses the pivotal importance, for our

Judgment, of the just and merciful treatment of neighbour. Christ will identify with the least of our brothers and sisters, and will take as being done to him whatever we do to the least important man or woman. But there are two other parables immediately prior to this in the same chapter, both concerned with the judgment of God. There is the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, at the end of which Christ warns us to “*watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour when the Son of Man comes*” (25: 1-13). The next parable is our passage today (25:14-30), and it is just as long as our Lord’s teaching on the General Judgment immediately following it. It is most stimulating to observe that our Lord stresses the dire consequences for the *little* person, the person of *very modest* talents, the person who is scarcely likely “to make a splash,” if he neglects to put what he has to diligent use. We may perhaps say that, as against Carlyle’s focus on the very notable individuals who lead the masses, our Lord is here saying that in the plan of the Lord of history, each unknown individual within the masses is critical to the

fulfilment of the divine plan. We all matter, and we all matter a great deal. We shall never know in this life the ramifications (in God's sight and in the working out of his Providence) of the hidden heroism of ordinary persons who resolve to seek the sanctity of Christ in everyday life. *"Then the man who had received the one talent came. 'Master,' he said, 'I was afraid and went out and hid your talent in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.' His master replied, 'You wicked, lazy servant! ...throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth'"* (Matthew 25:14 30).

It matters enormously to God that we, each of us, no matter how modest our talents and circumstances, apply ourselves to the wheel of life and do God's will as it presents itself to us in the duties of everyday life. The call to personal holiness is universal. What the world needs are not the Bonapartes, but the saints, saints in ordinary households and in ordinary work settings. Yes, we need saints at the helm such as St Thomas More, chancellor of

England, and St Louis, King of France. But really, what is that before the mass of mankind? What is needed is what Christ stresses: the vast stream of *one-talent* persons taking up the call to goodness and carrying it through to the very end, unbeknown to others but known very well by the One who matters, God.

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Second reflection:

Everyday work St Paul makes it abundantly clear that the Christian must be intent on making progress in the one thing necessary, personal holiness. The context of making constant progress is one's ordinary everyday working situation, generally unnoticed and fairly unchanging. Our ordinary life with its constant and unnoticed work is the great medium for growth in sanctity. It is in this work that we express our love for others, and above all for God. This everyday work must be sanctified. It was by means of the sanctified and sanctifying efforts of ordinary Christians over some three centuries that the Roman Empire became Christian.

If the world is to be evangelized again, much will depend on the little people, the ordinary faithful and their progress in sanctity through their ordinary everyday working lives.



Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 86 (85):3, 5 Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I cry to you all the day long. O Lord, you are good and forgiving, full of mercy to all who call to you.

Collect God of might, giver of every good gift, put into our hearts the love of your name, so that, by deepening our sense of reverence, you may nurture in us what is good and, by your watchful care, keep safe what you have nurtured. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 20:7-9; Psalm 63:2 6, 8-9;
Romans 12:1-2; Matthew 16:21-27

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke

him. Never, Lord! he said. This shall never happen to you! Jesus turned and said to Peter, Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men. Then Jesus said to his disciples, If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done. (Matthew 16:21-27)

The Cross The Apostles accepted our Lord's proclamation of the Kingdom of Heaven, and they accepted him as its promised Messiah-King. It would be a kingdom of glory, and they gladly accepted our Lord's selection of them as his privileged companions. Their notions of all this needed to be purified and developed, but this development would come — with the tragic exception

of Judas Iscariot. It is difficult to get inside the mind of Iscariot. Perhaps when it dawned on him that the “Kingdom of Heaven” was going to be very different from what he had bargained for, his heart changed. Especially decisive for him was our Lord’s public proclamation of the Eucharist — without revealing his name, our Lord refers to him as “a devil” (John 6: 71-72). Another decisive moment may have been our Lord’s explicit prophecy of his rejection by the nation’s leaders and his passion and death. So startling was this, that, as we read in our passage today, Simon Peter sprang to reject our Lord’s predictions. He assured Jesus with vehemence that this would never happen to him, and presumed to rebuke him for expecting such a course as necessary. Doubtlessly this reflected the thinking of the Twelve, and at Christ’s sharp correction of Peter and his manner of thinking, Judas in his heart may have given up on our Lord even more decisively. Deep within his heart, his plans to abandon ship and pass to the other side may have now been hatched. All this, Christ knew with sorrow, as he looked upon his deteriorating

companion. The point here, though, is that the glory of the Kingdom of Heaven turned on the Cross. Our Lord was to show in his own person, and was showing progressively in his teaching, that the path to glory lay in obedient suffering. The acceptance and following of Jesus Christ involved the mystery of the Cross. *“Then Jesus said to his disciples, If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it”* (Matthew 16:21-27). But of course, the practical question is, what steps are we to take in order to follow Jesus Christ wisely and prudently in this path?

We must resolve truly to take the path of Jesus Christ, while being wise in our notions of what this involves. If we do not set out on Christ’s way, we shall not attain the glory intended for us as sharers in the Kingdom. Of course, we cannot in a few sentences here encompass the entire Christian way, but one thing can be said. It is that Christ makes it clear in page after page of the Gospel that humility is the essential ladder by which we mount the

Cross with him. It is the teaching of all the masters of the Christian life that humility is the basis, and one obvious reason for this is that humility was so basic a virtue of Jesus Christ. *Come to me*, he said, *and learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart*. His submission to the Cross and his humble acceptance of the will of his heavenly Father was a manifestation of his humility. If we are humble before God (and others) we shall want to obey him. The path of the Cross is the path of humility after the manner of Jesus Christ. Christ attained to glory, but only by means of the humiliation of the Cross. But let us ask our question: What steps are we to take in order to traverse the path of humility wisely and prudently? Here, I specify one virtue which we ought cultivate daily: *gratitude*. We ought take every opportunity to be grateful and to express gratitude to God and man. If we grow in gratitude, we shall be growing in humility. When John Henry Newman published his *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk* (published in January 1875) as his answer to Gladstone's runaway attack on the Catholic Church (published in October 1874), it

achieved instant fame — not only in England but even internationally. Tributes poured in from high and low. He had left Gladstone standing nowhere. What is notable, though, was the constant expression by Newman of *gratitude* to each person who wrote to him to congratulate him on his resounding success. Even to those who did not write to him directly, but who praised him in other contexts, he wrote to express gratitude. Cardinal Cullen over in Ireland expressed high praise for Newman in his pastoral letter — and Newman wrote to him to express his *gratitude*. Newman's example in this respect gives us an important cue. In everything, and always, in good times and in bad, cultivate a profound spirit of gratitude.

So then, where may one start in the business of climbing the path of the Cross? Firstly, understand well that the path of the Cross involves the path of humility. What, then, to do about growing in genuine humility? Take steps to be always grateful, and readily express gratitude to God and man. God's loving hand is in everything. A person who has become profoundly grateful, who is always

grateful, whose gratitude continues unabated in good times and in bad, and who is grateful even to his enemies and to those who have caused him hurt and harm, is becoming humble. He is mounting with sure steps the ladder that will take him up the Cross of Christ. It is through this door that he passes on to the glory of the Kingdom.



Monday of the twenty-second week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 86 (85):3, 5 Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I cry to you all the day long. O Lord, you are good and forgiving, full of mercy to all who call to you.

Collect God of might, giver of every good gift, put into our hearts the love of your name, so that, by deepening our sense of reverence, you may nurture in us what is good and, by your watchful care, keep safe what you have nurtured. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 2:1-5; Psalm 118;

Luke 4:16-30

Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had grown up, and went according to his custom into the synagogue on the sabbath day. He stood up to read and was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written: The Spirit of the Lord is

upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord. Rolling up the scroll, he handed it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him. He said to them, "Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." And all spoke highly of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They also asked, "Is this not the son of Joseph?" He said to them, "Surely you will quote me this proverb, 'Physician, cure yourself,' and say, 'Do here in your native place the things that we heard were done in Capernaum.'" And he said, "Amen, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own native place. Indeed, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah when the sky was closed for three and a half years and a severe famine spread over the entire land. It was to none of these that Elijah was sent, but only to a widow in Zarephath in the land of Sidon. Again, there were many

lepers in Israel during the time of Elisha the prophet; yet not one of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.” When the people in the synagogue heard this, they were all filled with fury. They rose up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town had been built, to hurl him down headlong. But he passed through the midst of them and went away. (Luke 4:16-30)

The Scriptures In our Gospel today we see Christ doing what he did time and again during his public ministry. He used with profound reverence the Scriptures, pointing to himself as their meaning. I remember being most struck by an educated Christian lawyer who once said to me he had always thought that Jesus Christ could not read or write! Jesus Christ loved to read, use and teach the meaning of the Scriptures — which is to say, the Old Testament. Our passage today has him taking up the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, looking for the text that he needed, reading it out, and commenting on it in decisive and startling fashion — giving it its true and long-awaited

meaning. The meaning of the passage he read out was now before them: *he* was its meaning and its fulfilment. Christ always spoke with reverence of Scripture. He knew the Scriptures thoroughly. He obviously had effortlessly memorized vast portions or knew it instinctively: “*How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?*” (John 7:15). With ease he overcame the doctors and scribes in any debate on the meaning of the Scriptures. He devastatingly applied the Writings to his critics. Finally, we read, *no one dared to ask him any more questions* (Matthew 22:46 and Luke 20:40). He totally accepted the word of Scripture: they were God’s word, ultimately about himself, and their prophecies were and would be fulfilled — our text today is an instance of this. He believed the Old Testament was historical fact. This is not to say that every allusion that he made to a figure of the Old Testament was, in effect, a statement intended to convey that the text was strict history in the modern sense. But it is manifest that he affirmed that revealed religion was absolutely historical. I remember when a stele was

discovered with the name of the “House of David” on it, this was seen as *at last* giving historical support to an important Old Testament figure. But Christ was the son of David and the son of Abraham. He was addressed as David’s son. Our Lord would have condemned any position that regarded such a Biblical person as, in effect, mythical. He was *David’s* descendant. Our best authority as to the historicity of the Old Testament is not an archaeological stele, but the word of Christ.

Christ quoted the Old Testament in rebuffing Satan (Matthew 4), and in his parables (Luke 16:29, 31). He often quoted Scripture as the basis for his own teaching. His (what we might call) ethical teaching was much the same as what we find already written in Scripture: “*So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets*” (Matthew 7:12). When asked by the man what good deed he need do to gain eternal life, he replied that he must keep the commandments — and he quoted several of the Ten Commandments (Matthew 19:18). He then went on to give

the most distinctive thing about his teaching: “*If you would be perfect ... come, follow me*” (Matthew 19: 16-21). He taught a doctrine that fulfilled the law and the prophets, taking their teaching further and higher, and promising the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to enable this to be lived — indeed to bestow a new birth. But the holy Scriptures ever remained the backdrop. The especially novel things he taught by and large related to his own Person and faith in him as the means of salvation. The Church he founded on Peter was the bearer of the kingdom he announced and established, and which was present in his own Person. This too was the fulfilment of the Scriptures. Many other things could be said, showing Christ’s veneration and use of the existing Sacred Scriptures. We see this veneration at work in our Gospel today (Luke 4:16-30): the words of Isaiah are solemnly read, and their interpretation is authoritatively given. *He* is their meaning. As Christ thought of the Scriptures, so should we his disciples. The Sacred Scriptures are not to be read in just any fashion, for like any ancient compilation they can be so easily

misunderstood. The tremendous variety of interpretations prevalent about the meaning of the Scriptures in our Lord's own day ought alert us to this perennial danger. The inspired Scriptures are to be read with the mind of Christ, with Christ teaching us their meaning. Our Gospel scene today offers us a paradigm image: It is Christ who reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and it is Christ who explains the meaning of the inspired word. But *where* is Christ found to be teaching the meaning of the Scriptures? He is found in his Church, from which he is teaching his chosen ones. That Church — Christ's Catholic Church founded on Peter and his successors — gives to the faithful access to Jesus Christ who abides within as the Head and Bridegroom. Let us contemplate Christ holding the inspired scroll, reading it lovingly, and teaching therefrom. Let us take our cue from the Master and nourish in our hearts a Christ-like love for the same Scriptures, all the while hearing his voice, speaking from within his Body the Church, explaining their meaning.



Tuesday of the Twenty-second week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 86 (85):3, 5 Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I cry to you all the day long. O Lord, you are good and forgiving, full of mercy to all who call to you.

Collect God of might, giver of every good gift, put into our hearts the love of your name, so that, by deepening our sense of reverence, you may nurture in us what is good and, by your watchful care, keep safe what you have nurtured. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 2:10-16; Psalm 144;

Luke 4:31-37.

Jesus went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and on the Sabbath began to teach the people. They were amazed at his teaching, because his message had authority. In the synagogue there was a man possessed by a demon, an evil spirit. He cried out at the top of his voice, Ha!

What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are- the Holy One of God! Be quiet! Jesus said sternly. Come out of him! Then the demon threw the man down before them all and came out without injuring him. All the people were amazed and said to each other, What is this teaching? With authority and power he gives orders to evil spirits and they come out! And the news about him spread throughout the surrounding area. (Luke 4:31-37)

God and the world It needs scarcely to be said that one of the great milestones of human history was the Industrial Revolution, when technology gradually became fundamental to the life of society. The bullock came to be replaced by the tractor, the horse by the motorbike. Science as applied, which is to say technology, was used in mass proportions and this constituted a revolution in daily practical life. It is a revolution that is continuing. This radical change in man's circumstances was not just the result of shifts in the intellectual life of man, but it itself stimulated and produced those shifts. The new scientific

and technological imagination of modern man took seriously the world and nature with its own independent system of laws. This constituted an unending prospect of research and application. God had created the world with its own specific system which, it was realized, he himself respected while continually sustaining it. But one result of man's coming to respect the world with its incalculable intricacy and vastness of laws — and then applying this knowledge to one's daily circumstances — was that, to a far greater degree than was usual for mankind, the world was seen by many as independent of a Creator. In fact, we might even say that modern man with his heightened sense of the fact and wonder of the material universe, became somewhat like *primal* man in his view of the Creator. He imagined the creator high-god, who initiated the world, as then withdrawing from the scene and leaving the world to itself and to unseen forces on a lower rung than himself. The Creator was lost from view and became a non-event. The radical insufficiency of things in an ontological sense constantly eluded modern man because the world became,

in his imagination, the one and only fact. The Supernatural was a pie in the sky, an opiate, a distraction, and, therefore, even a menace in view of the pressing business of putting bacon on the table and fuel in the car. God, being out of sight was out of mind, and thus became impotent. The only powerful thing was the world. Nothing could overcome or tame the world except, perhaps, science and technology. This is because this world is all that there really is, to all intents and purposes. That is the intellectual bind that technological man tends to be in.

This is why it is not only wholesome but critically important that we of the modern scientific age take the fact of divine revelation seriously. Within this world, imagined by contemporary man to be the primary and even the only fact, God has appeared and made known his will and plan. The word of God has been heard by specially chosen persons. God's word has been revealed, making known the unseen God. More than this, this same Word has become flesh and has lived among us. His glory has been seen, the *glory of the only-begotten Son of God, full of grace and*

truth. This is not the moment to attempt to speak of the Word made flesh exhaustively — an impossible project anyway. As St John says at the end of his Gospel, the world could not contain the books that would have to be written. What we have alluded to here, though, is the tendency to think that the world is the truly powerful thing, and that God is powerless before it. It is pretty useless, so it is silently assumed, to pray for a change in things. This is because the world is just too big for “God” to do anything about. That is our secularly-minded image of the situation. What this means is that we need to immerse ourselves in the facts of divine revelation. Our imagination needs to become radically religious again. This can happen if we take seriously the revealed facts about God that have happened in the world, as they are recorded especially in the Gospels. This is where the Thought and Image of Jesus Christ as a living historical figure, and of him working his miracles, can be so beneficial. They bring home to us the almighty power of God, and that the world is as nothing before him. The word that God the Son made man utters is

irresistible. Not only is the world incapable of resisting the word of Jesus Christ, but so is the netherworld and all the lesser unseen beings of which the fallen imagination of man is so typically full. Our Gospel today (Luke 4: 31-37) is a case in point — and we are not talking of just mythical stories of some ancient religion, but of hard facts. *“In the synagogue there was a man possessed by a demon, an evil spirit.... Be quiet! Jesus said sternly. Come out of him! Then the demon threw the man down before them all and came out without injuring him.”* Jesus Christ reminds us of numerous things, but one of them is that God is almighty. God is the ultimate Fact. Without him, the world is nothing.

One of the things which modern psychology is discovering and insisting on — especially with those who aim to be agents of change in the world — is the importance of fundamental paradigms. Our basic starting points, our fundamental assumptions, even our core imagery, need to be brought into view and assessed. One such paradigm is that we of the modern age tend to assume

that practical power resides in and is to be discovered in this world alone. We can do nothing unless this world is harnessed. Nothing can stand up to or change this world and its course but a skilful taming of it, just as we must tame a wild horse. But no. Jesus Christ has come and he is with us still. He has overcome the world, and he will be King. This is the victory over the world, our faith.

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Second reflection: (Luke 4:31-37)

“What teaching! He gives orders to unclean spirits with authority and power” Our Lord’s *“teaching made a deep impression on them because he spoke with authority”*. After our Lord casts out the demon, the people exclaim in amazement: *“What teaching! He gives orders to unclean spirits with authority and power”*. The people were profoundly impressed with our Lord’s teaching. There are two aspects of this: the authority of our Lord’s teaching, and the authority of his Person. The goodness and power of his Person, so God-like (because divine!),

supports the authority of his teaching. So, what will help us accept and adhere to his teaching is if our minds and hearts are profoundly impressed with the goodness and power of his *Person*. We must find ways of being open to such an impression of our Lord. If this is ever to happen — our being profoundly impressed with the very Person of our Lord — we must think of our Lord in a sustained way with our very hearts. We must contemplate him with an open and prayerful heart, in a heart-to-heart conversation, perhaps wordless. Our Lord, at the Last Supper, during his prayer to his heavenly Father said that this is eternal life, to know you, Father, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

Let us put daily time into striving to know the Person of Jesus through sustained contemplation of him and his word. On this basis, not only will we admire his teaching, but we shall love and adhere to it, for it will be due to adherence to his Person. “*If you love me, you will keep my commandments,*” our Lord said to his disciples.



Wednesday of the twenty-second week in Ordinary

Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 86 (85):3, 5 Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I cry to you all the day long. O Lord, you are good and forgiving, full of mercy to all who call to you.

Collect God of might, giver of every good gift, put into our hearts the love of your name, so that, by deepening our sense of reverence, you may nurture in us what is good and, by your watchful care, keep safe what you have nurtured. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Psalm 32;

Luke 4:38-44

Jesus left the synagogue and went to the home of Simon. Now Simon's mother in law was suffering from a high fever, and they asked Jesus to help her. So he bent over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. She got up

at once and began to wait on them. When the sun was setting, the people brought to Jesus all who had various kinds of sickness, and laying his hands on each one, he healed them. Moreover, demons came out of many people, shouting, You are the Son of God! But he rebuked them and would not allow them to speak, because they knew he was the Christ. At daybreak Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was, they tried to keep him from leaving them. But he said, I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent. And he kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea.
(Luke 4:38-44)

Time for prayer Consider the pattern that is discernible in our Lord's life, taking our Gospel passage as a snapshot. Our Lord has just come from the Synagogue. Ah, the Synagogue! Since his infancy he had been frequenting the Synagogue with his parents, the all-holy Mary, and the great though hidden saint, Joseph. Quietly, Sabbath after Sabbath, they had gone to the Synagogue to

join the villagers in their listening to the inspired Writings, to hear it commented upon, to listen to the instruction offered, and to worship and pray. Perhaps they had spent personal time together in the Synagogue outside of the Sabbath observance, alone as a family. Perhaps Jesus had often spent periods alone in the Synagogue, in silent prayer. Regular attendance, hearing the word of God, responding to it in prayer, worshipping with the community was an essential part of the hidden life of Jesus Christ. He still does this in the sense that he is mystically the head of his Church gathered constantly in worship and prayer. Our Gospel scene also shows him deeply immersed in the lives of his people. Ah, the people! He has come from their midst in the Synagogue, surrounded by the people — and he has just driven out a demon in dramatic circumstances. He characteristically moves around with his disciples, and here in our scene he is shown returning to Simon's house. Probably he resided there, now that Capernaum was his base of operations in Galilee. Luke informs us that he was driven out of Nazareth because of his personal claims. In

fact, he was nearly lynched, but “*he passed through the midst of them and went on his way*” — to Capernaum (Luke 4: 30-31). The point here, though, is that Christ is characteristically immersed in the lives of his people, beginning with his own holy family, extending to the wider circle of his relatives and clan — his “brethren” — passing on to his immediate community, and embracing his nation and, unknown to others, the whole wide world. All are his brothers. When in our passage today, the people found him and tried to keep him with them, he said: “*I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent. And he kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea*” (Luke 4: 38-44). He was sent to the whole House of Israel, and in ultimate terms, far beyond.

But let us notice one important detail about the pattern of Christ’s life. We read that “*At daybreak Jesus went out to a solitary place.*” This person, Jesus Christ, was God — God the Son, endlessly and uninterruptedly caught up in an ineffable and inexpressible union with the Father. This

union of love is unimaginable and incalculable. This loving union is, indeed, a Person — the third divine Person, the Holy Spirit. So nothing at all could ever interrupt the union with the Father enjoyed by Jesus Christ, and it is the dearest hope of the Christian to share in that communion, by the power of the Holy Spirit who is received at Baptism. In all the elements of the life of Jesus Christ which were mentioned above and of which there are mentions in our Gospel passage today — Synagogue, family, village, nation — this union with the Father remained absolute and total. Nothing could possibly threaten it, no adverse circumstance, no feature of life whatsoever. No matter how weary Christ might conceivably have been, no matter how pressed on all sides by the importunities of the people seeking relief from their many-sided burdens, no matter how harried by the hostility of his jealous enemies, no matter how desolated by the desertion of those he chose to love, such as Judas Iscariot, nothing could possibly threaten the profundity of his union with his heavenly Father. This we know because he was

God the Son. Yet we see in the Gospels that he *set time aside* to be with his heavenly Father in a formal sense. He spent time in prayer, and did not engage in other things when doing this. “*At daybreak Jesus went out to a solitary place.*” A little later in the same Gospel of St Luke, we read that “*At that time Jesus went to a mountain to pray. He spent the whole night in prayer to God*” (Luke 6:12). The whole night! In his human nature, Christ felt the need to give exclusive time to communing with his heavenly Father — just as, we might say without disrespect, he felt the need to eat and sleep. It was a need welling up from the bottomless well of his filial love. Nothing can compare with the love of Jesus Christ for his heavenly Father, and this expressed itself in the time that he took out for prayer — whether it was in the hills, on the mountain, in the Synagogue, wherever. Though divine, and because divine, he put time aside for prayer.

Christ was a mortal, but not a mere mortal. He was human, but not just human. He was a man, but not just a man. He was also divine, the divine Son of the divine

Father, both being the one God. He set aside time for prayer — so then, should we who are mere mortals, mere humans, mere men and women. We must put aside time for prayer every day, and longer times for prayer not infrequently. We must learn how to pray easily, and this requires time. We who are mere mortals cannot do it only and merely on the run. We must give time to it, and as a habit it would be a good idea to emulate what we see Jesus Christ doing in our Gospel passage today: putting time into prayer at the beginning of the day. Let us build this into our plan of life, so that we start the day prayerfully, and make of the day a prayer.

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Second reflection:

Making progress Let us notice how Paul and Timothy address the Christians in their Letter to Colossae as “the saints”: *“From Paul, appointed by God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus and from our brother Timothy to the saints in Colossae, our faithful brothers in Christ”* (Colossians 1: 1-2). They are “the saints” or holy ones precisely because they are, as he says, “in Christ”. This is the great fact about the Christian: he is immersed in Christ and shares, in principle, his life and therefore his holiness. The task ahead, as he mentions repeatedly in his Letters, is to *“make more and more progress”* in this life in Christ. The elements of this life are faith, hope and love: *“We have never failed to remember you in our prayers and to give thanks for you to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, ever since we heard about your faith in Christ Jesus and the love that you show towards all the saints because of the hope which is stored up for you in heaven”* (1:3). These virtues of faith and hope and of love are the work of “God’s grace,” producing its “results”. The grace of God

comes to the Christian from accepting “*the message of the truth*”. Not only here in Colossians, but repeatedly St Paul refers in his Letters to “the truth”, as does St John in his Letters. Our Lord in St John’s Gospel also repeatedly refers to “the truth” and to himself as “the Truth”. In the presence of Pontius Pilate, he stated that he had been born into the world to bear witness to “the truth”, and at the Last Supper he said that he was the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Let us ponder prayerfully on these brief texts and consider their implications for the great work of “making progress” that must mark the daily life of the Christian. There is nothing more important.



Thursday of the twenty-second week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 86 (85):3, 5 Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I cry to you all the day long. O Lord, you are good and forgiving, full of mercy to all who call to you.

Collect God of might, giver of every good gift, put into our hearts the love of your name, so that, by deepening our sense of reverence, you may nurture in us what is good and, by your watchful care, keep safe what you have nurtured. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 3:18-25; Psalm 23;

Luke 5:1-11

One day as Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret, with the people crowding round him and listening to the word of God, he saw at the water's edge two boats, left there by the fishermen, who were washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, the one belonging

to Simon, and asked him to put out a little from shore. Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat. When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch. Simon answered, Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets. When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signalled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man! For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners. Then Jesus said to Simon, Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men. So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him. (Luke 5:1-11)

God, holy and loving It is obvious that power does not of itself imply goodness. Power is one of the

earliest of a person's experiences: he experiences the power of his parents or guardians, the power of his teachers, the power of his rulers. All through life he is coming to terms with the power that is exercised over him. It is a moot point whether this power is generally exercised well or badly, whether the ones who exercise it are themselves good or bad people. If he himself gains power, the story is the same. He can be corrupted by power, and liable to use his power in ways that are not good. One thing is certain, power is very often in the hands of bad people, and it is often exercised in profoundly harmful ways. Great power was in the hands of Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Pol Pot. As a result of their exercise of power, countless lives were lost and an incalculable degree of suffering was visited upon societies over which they had some reach. Perhaps as a result of this common human experience, the religions of man do not portray the gods, who exercise heavenly power, as consistently good. In fact, it is a question whether there were any gods at all who were perceived as purely good. In the rituals and myths of

the religions, divine power is a mixed blessing. Power is the foremost attribute of the gods, the principal thing man thought of when thinking of the divine. Man is weak and vulnerable, and so he turns to the heavens for divine aid, or at least to ensure that the gods do not become irritable and hostile. All up, quite often the heavens are not perceived as a very heavenly place, but are more or less a projection of the mixed bag of the powers at work in our very broken world. However, this is not the whole story of power. Power is exercised by good people in good and beneficial ways, and, at times, by persons of holiness. As a matter of fact, the most powerful person ever to have appeared among men was utterly and completely holy. I refer, of course, to Jesus Christ. No-one has ever had his scale of power. He could do anything he chose. He could heal any disease, feed vast numbers with practically nothing, calm storms, raise the dead — anything at all. In his case, absolute power was in the hands of One who was absolutely good.

In our Gospel today (Luke 5: 1-11), our Lord is teaching the crowds from Simon's boat. He finished speaking to them and turned to Simon who, obviously, was with him in the boat. He asked Simon to move the boat out into the deep, for they were very near to the shore. Go out more into the deep, he said, and lower your nets for a catch. *Teacher*, Simon said in reply, *I have been at it all night long, but have caught nothing. But if you say so, I will let down the nets.* Let us notice Simon's full and simple faith in Jesus. God's will — as manifest in providence, circumstances, directives from those above us — ushers us through doors we might think offer little or no satisfying prospect. What Christ told him to do, Simon scarcely thought to be promising or satisfying to him in terms of practical result. But he readily did it on the word of Jesus Christ. The result was instantaneous and astounding. They *"caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signalled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink."*

Both boats were beginning to sink with the fish. It was a miracle, a sign of great power though exercised on a small arena with a tiny audience. It was meant for Simon and his companions, principally James and John the sons of Zebedee — Simon's (and presumably Andrew's) partners. This display of power was life-changing for them, but not least because it manifested the utter *holiness* of the One possessing the power. The response of Simon to the unexpected miracle before him was a hearty and humble recognition not only, nor perhaps primarily, of the power of Jesus Christ. What he especially recognized was the *holiness* of Christ, and by contrast his own sinfulness. Christ's power manifested his holiness. This was consistent with the entire sweep of divine revelation: God, in exercising his power, manifested his holiness. It is a tribute to Simon, and a sign of his greatness of soul, that it was precisely Christ's holiness which he perceived in the power that had been shown before him. “*When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, Go away*

from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” This was scarcely the response of, let us say, the Pharisees.

That Simon, having so commendably perceived the holiness of Jesus Christ in the exercise of his power, should then stress the distance between them, is natural. Go away from me, Lord! he said. Rudolf Otto in his landmark work, *The Idea of the Holy*, stresses not only the attraction of the holy, but the terror it inspires in wayward man. But there is more. Christ reveals not only divine power, not only divine holiness, but divine love. *Do not be afraid!* he assures Simon. The incarnate God does not want the sinner who loves him to fear being in his presence. Come to me, he says to Simon. *Do not be afraid, for from now on you will catch men.* The all-powerful God is holy. But especially, he is loving.

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Second reflection: (Luke 5:1-11)

“Master,” Simon replied “we worked hard all night long and caught nothing”

Simon Peter and his companions had spent the whole night, he would tell our Lord, working hard at their fishing, and had caught nothing. How well that statement reflects much of human effort and work, at least as it appears to the ones doing the work. Our daily round of work is ordinary, uneventful, and all too often seemingly fairly fruitless. We would love to see dramatic results, achievements that will bring great benefits to ourselves and to others who depend on us. But all too often it is not so. Our life is ordinary. But this does not make it less pleasing to God — especially if our work is done in a spirit of obedience and trust in his loving wisdom. But then our Lord asks Simon to put out for a catch, and instantly a great catch is made. Among the many lessons this Gospel passage teaches is that of obedience. If we but obey Christ and God, working to fulfil the responsibilities that he gives us or which

providence seems to beckon us to assume, in his own time God will grant the increase — whether quickly or in the fullness of time. The fruit will come.

Let us then spend our days doing what God wants us to do and sanctifying our daily work, be it seemingly uneventful or obviously fruitful. In this way will we be sanctified, and God will be glorified.



Friday of the twenty-second week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 86 (85):3, 5 Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I cry to you all the day long. O Lord, you are good and forgiving, full of mercy to all who call to you.

Collect God of might, giver of every good gift, put into our hearts the love of your name, so that, by deepening our sense of reverence, you may nurture in us what is good and, by your watchful care, keep safe what you have nurtured. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 4:1-5; Psalm 36;

Luke 5:33-39

They said to Jesus, John's disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking. Jesus answered, Can you make the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from

them; in those days they will fast. He told them this parable: No one tears a patch from a new garment and sews it on an old one. If he does, he will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for he says, 'The old is better.' (Luke 5:33-39)

Bridegroom There are many unique features of the godhead as it is portrayed in the Judeo-Christian revelation. There are other features of it that are rarely seen in the religions of mankind. For instance, it is, at the very least, rare among religions for there to be but *one* God. Almost always there are *many*, and that is to be expected, for man's experience is that numerous persons and forces are responsible for what happens. It is almost impossible to *imagine* but one person or force being the cause of everything that has happened or that exists. It is

scarcely to be expected that one unseen deity, and only one, is responsible for the existence and course of all that is, be it seen or unseen. The task of creating and governing would be too great. Perhaps this is the most striking thing about revealed religion, that it is a religion of monotheism. Further, the God of whom it speaks is *almighty*. This too is difficult to *imagine*, especially for modern man who is acutely aware of the laws of the universe which seem to be inexorable — and especially as prayer often *seems* to be futile. But there is another striking feature of revealed religion, and it would be interesting to know whether it is actually unique. I am sure it is at least rare. I refer to God's own description of his *relationship with his people*. It is common for a tribe, a society, or a nation to have its particular gods. I am not sure that it is common in the lore of those societies that its gods especially *choose them* to be their *own* — I suspect that they themselves, the tribes or societies, gradually choose their gods. In the case of the God of revelation, on his own initiative *he chose* certain individuals and through them *he chose* a people. His

choice of them was an initiative of love. But consider how he described himself in relation to them. An important image of God, both in the Old Testament and in the New, was of a *Bridegroom*. There is a great tenderness on the part of Yahweh towards his people, as it is expressed in some of the prophets. Especially in the prophet Hosea, God is *Husband* to his people. His chosen people is his spouse. His insistence that they not worship other gods is cast in terms of a marriage bond and relationship. It is a question of marital fidelity. It could be argued that the name that God gave to Moses as being his own name (*Yahweh*) has the connotation of *Bridegroom* — *I am, and as I am, I shall be there with them*.

No prophet of the Old Testament would dare to refer to himself as the people's *Bridegroom*. This would surely be tantamount to suggesting that, in some sense, he shares in the status and life of God whom at least some prophets — as mentioned above — referred to as the *Bridegroom* or *Husband*. But Jesus Christ calmly does this very thing. At the query about his disciples not fasting and praying after

the manner of the disciples of John and those of the Pharisees, Christ says “*Can you make the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; in those days they will fast*” (Luke 5: 33 39). Jesus Christ is “the bridegroom” and he envisages his presence among them as being part of a “wedding.” In him, God the Bridegroom has come for, and has begun, the nuptials. There is to be a marriage, a great union of love established, a new life. His disciples are the guests, and it can scarcely be expected that anything other than rejoicing occur while he is still among them. It is also to be remembered that Yahweh God uses the image of Bridegroom and Husband not in reference to his relationship with individuals, but in respect to his relationship with his *people*. He is not “Husband” to Moses, but his “friend.” He is Husband to his chosen people. So, too, does Jesus Christ refer to himself as “bridegroom” in relation to his people in the first instance, and not to individuals. At the Last Supper, he tells his disciples that he does not call them servants, but

“friends.” He is not referring to himself as their “bridegroom” but as their “friend.” That is, the religion of Jesus Christ is a religion of personal friendship with him who is the Son of God and our Redeemer. This friendship involves a share in his life, which is the life of grace. But when it is a question of the entire Church, then the image of Bridegroom is used of Christ, just as it was used of Yahweh God in the Old Testament in relation to his people. A Christian marriage shares in this relationship and is a sign of it. As a matter of fact, Christian spirituality has extended the term to include the relationship between Christ and each member of the Church. The point, though, is that Christ has come to unite to himself all the children of God who accept him in faith. All together, they are called to be in him as his new people. He is *Bridegroom* to the Church, his spouse.

This is surely a special and remarkable feature of the Christian religion. It is yet another expression of the revelation that God is love in a way that far surpasses any doctrine of the other religions of mankind. The unseen

heart of all reality is a limitless furnace of pure, holy, infinite, all-powerful love. There is love in the world, reaching sublime points at times — well, it is especially this which reflects the heart and soul of the Source of all reality. That heart and soul is the infinite, transcendent, immanent God. He has become man, and is with us constantly as Bridegroom. Let us live on the basis of faith in this stupendous revelation, the revelation of the love of God for each and all.

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Second reflection:

Jesus Christ By and large, throughout Christian history the temptation has constantly been to think of Jesus Christ as simply a man, a very great religious man indeed, but still simply a man. This was the case during our Lord's own life and public ministry. This is natural — all too natural — because, as was obvious to all, Jesus Christ was indeed a man. But he himself revealed, and the Father revealed, and the Holy Spirit revealed that he was also the Son of God, and equal to the Father. St John's Gospel makes clear that the scribes and Pharisees could see what our Lord was claiming to be: they attempted to stone him because, they asserted, he was only a man and yet he claimed that God was his very Father and *so he made himself equal to God*. Jesus is indeed man, but the distinctively Christian claim is that first and foremost he is God. He is a divine Person. St Paul gives Jesus the highest titles, and we ought ponder them often. He is *the image of the unseen God* and all is created in him and through him and for him. He is *the head of the Church*

which is his body, and by his Cross he redeemed all (Colossians 1: 15-20). We should take active steps to preserve in our hearts the highest reverence for the divinity of Jesus. If we do not, we shall not have the inner conviction nor the courage born of love to be able to bear witness to Jesus before various non-Christians (Buddhists, Hindus, Moslems etc.) and virtual atheists around us.

Jesus is God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, Son and Image of the Father, head of the Church and our Redeemer.



Saturday of the twenty-second week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 86 (85):3, 5 Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I cry to you all the day long. O Lord, you are good and forgiving, full of mercy to all who call to you.

Collect God of might, giver of every good gift, put into our hearts the love of your name, so that, by deepening our sense of reverence, you may nurture in us what is good and, by your watchful care, keep safe what you have nurtured. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 4:6-15; Psalm 144;

Luke 6:1-5

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the cornfields, and his disciples began to pick some ears of corn, rub them in their hands and eat the grain. Some of the Pharisees asked, Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath? Jesus answered them, Have you never read what

David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and taking the consecrated bread, he ate what is lawful only for priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions. Then Jesus said to them, The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath. (Luke 6:1-5)

The Sabbath The Gospels do not purport to present a complete picture of the religious classes of Judaism at the time of Jesus Christ. By that I mean, especially, that for all the conflict that obtained between Jesus Christ and the scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, priestly aristocracy and rulers generally, the picture thus presented is not meant to be the whole story. For instance, Christ did not think, nor did he say, nor do the Gospels say, that the Pharisees were a wholly corrupt religious class. Out of that class came one of the most outstanding Christians of all time, Saul of Tarsus. While the same Saul is not mentioned in the Gospels, one of the Gospel authors (St Luke) makes of him a major protagonist in his account of the infant Church — the Acts of the Apostles. Nicodemus, for whom St John takes pains to give space in his Gospel,

was not only a disciple of Jesus Christ, but with Joseph of Arimathea — a fellow leader of the Jews — went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus and gave him an honoured, if hasty, burial. They were of this ruling class. This was precisely when the Twelve were demoralized and perhaps in hiding after the catastrophe of Christ's death. Plainly, many of the Pharisees were corrupt and constituted a significant element among those who orchestrated the Passion and Death of the Messiah. They seem to have been mainly from the Temple aristocracy. But let us give credit where it is due. If there is one thing that especially distinguished the religious life of the Jewish nation in the context of classical times, it was the observance of the Sabbath Day. It was one of the Ten Commandments, and one feature of keeping holy the Sabbath was precisely the Sabbath Rest. It was a day when the ordinary work-a-day week came to an end, and the nation rested — which is to say, rested in God. It was the Lord's Day, involving Synagogue and rest from ordinary work. Now, it seems that it was especially the Pharisee class that pressured the

nation at various levels to observe the Sabbath rest. This was a great achievement over a long period of time, even if it was marred by a profoundly mixed motivation on the part of very many of them, and even if it ran far to excess in the detail. As the colloquial saying goes, the devil was in the detail, and Christ saw the presence of the devil in some of it.

The Sabbath rest was a pivotal institution in the life of the chosen people of God, and in this the nation had much to thank the Pharisees for. One need only think of the modern age, and in particular the modern practice of the Christian Sabbath to appreciate the point. All would recognize and expect that among the traditional Christian communions (and excluding some small, tightly-knit Christian communities), the Catholic Church is the leader in religious practice. But consider the Sabbath practice among its adherents. More Catholics participate in Sunday worship than others, but still, it is low. It is very far from being the majority. More to the point here, how many regard Sunday as a true day of religious rest, a day of rest

in God, the Lord's Day? What a difference to the religious life of the Church's children it would be if the Sabbath were observed as it ought to be! I say this to emphasize the achievement of the Pharisees, and especially to emphasize the importance of the Third Commandment in revealed religion — and it was the observance of the Third Commandment which was the issue in our Gospel scene today (Luke 6: 1 5). “*Remember to keep holy the Sabbath Day. Six days you may labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God ... the Lord has blessed the Sabbath and made it holy*” (Exodus 20: 8-11). It was to be the Day when the nation would interrupt ordinary work and turn to the Lord their God, recalling his work of creation and his redemption of them from slavery. In view of the central importance of this institution in revealed religion, our Gospel passage today, which recalls the words of Jesus Christ on it, is of capital importance. Christ tells us that *he is the Lord of the Sabbath*. If anyone had been asked, who is the Lord of the Sabbath? then of course he would have answered that it

was the Lord God. *“The seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God”* (Exodus 20:10). Here, though, Christ says in the presence of his critics, the guardians of the Sabbath, that he, Jesus of Nazareth, is the Lord of the Sabbath! The Sabbath is, then, the Day of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are to rest in him on that day. On another occasion our Lord said, *“Come to me all you who labour and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you ... You will find rest for your souls.”* We were made to find our rest in Jesus Christ. He is our source of happiness, fulfilment, peace and rest. Mankind was made to find happiness in him as Lord, Lord of all. This is expressed in the Christian Sabbath, the Day of the Lord Jesus when he rose from the dead. Through him all things are made, and he re-created fallen man by his death and resurrection. Let us resolve to observe the Sabbath and make it the day when we turn from our ordinary round to rest in the Lord, through the Eucharistic celebration, gentle prayer, and general restoration.

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Second reflection:

Holiness If we are ever to live a vigorous Christian life we must see the fundamental things with a sharp and clear focus. That focus can be achieved if we keep before us certain great contrasts, certain clear cut alternatives. St Paul describes those contrasts. Once, he tells the Colossians, they did “*evil things*”. Now God “*has reconciled*” them, and they “*are able to appear before him holy, pure and blameless*” (Colossians 1). There is a vivid contrast presented between evil and holiness. Holiness is the all-important objective. But of course, the reader must *desire* holiness. Indeed, we must have a *very great* desire for it. God has implanted this desire within us, but sin and evil can all but extinguish this desire. It is possible to “*drift away from the hope promised by the Good News, which you have heard*”. That hope is to be free of sin and to be “*holy, pure and blameless*” in the sight of God. St Paul elsewhere writes that *before the world was made God chose us, chose us in Christ to be holy and full of love in his sight.*

By the power of God holiness is possible for each of us. But do we want it? We really have to want it and make it our daily choice. It is the one thing necessary.



Twenty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 119 (118):137, 124 You are just, O Lord, and your judgment is right; treat your servant in accord with your merciful love.

Collect O God, by whom we are redeemed and receive adoption, look graciously upon your beloved sons and daughters, that those who believe in Christ may receive true freedom and an everlasting inheritance. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezekiel 33:7-9; Psalm 94;

Romans 13: 8-10; Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus said to his disciples: If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the

church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them. (Matthew 18:15-20)

Society's calling Both our Gospel and our passage from Ezekiel remind us that we are our brother's keeper. We are born into a society, we live in a society, we work in a society, we serve a society. We are social by nature and by calling. Inasmuch as a person without goals is a person adrift, our goals in life must include our aims in respect to society. Christ is the key to everything created. All things, the Christian knows, find meaning and life in him, for in him dwells the fullness of the godhead bodily. "*He who sees me,*" our Lord said to his disciples, "*sees the Father*". Our ultimate goal, our calling from all eternity, is to be *in Christ*. It is by being in him that we are made

children of our heavenly Father, sharing in his life. It is by being in Christ, and walking in his footsteps, that we become, more and more, perfect images of the Father. *Be you imitators of me*, St Paul writes, *as I am of Christ*. Just as that is the case for each of us individually, just as it is the case for the whole Church, so too it is the case for human society. Society has its calling, as does each human being. Society is called to be *in Christ*, and to be more and more transformed into the image of the Son. As this applies to the individual, so it applies also to the human community as a whole. This is the meaning of our Lord's final charge to his disciples prior to ascending into heaven — *Go to the whole world and make disciples of all the nations!* This is the radical Christian vision of human society, and it is something every Christian ought sustain in his heart. But the problem for society, as for the individual and the Church, is sin. The world is weighed down with sin. But there is this added complication that for the great majority of persons in a modern secular world, "sin" is unreal. There is scarcely any such thing. Society accepts

the fact of wrongdoing, but not the fact of “sin,” for sin views “wrongdoing” in the light of its relation to God. God is not viewed as an objective reality. Wrongdoing, viewed precisely as an offence against the Creator, is deemed to be a subjective belief or persuasion and not an objective fact. Hence it is that any talk of society as such turning to God, or of discovering the Lordship of Christ — let alone accepting his doctrine and living in him as a public position — is a bit preposterous, unreal and irrelevant to the practical moral work of solving society’s evils. There is a tremendous challenge facing the Church’s distinctive mission and her members to society.

Little, though, will be done unless each and every Christian understands and accepts this mission, which is to draw society towards Christ, with the ultimate goal of it being in him. The goal of man and of society is to be in Christ — to be in union with him and to live by his life. An essential aspect of this mission — to bring society to Christ — is the readiness by the Christian to enter into what we might broadly call conversation or dialogue with

the society around us. When we read the newspapers and follow national and community discussions about the ways to meet society's needs, we ought enter into such discussions as opportunity presents itself. We ought strive to bring to the conversation effective solutions which Christ's teaching, as elaborated by the Church in her social doctrine, suggest. This teaching is grounded on an acceptance of the reality of God and the divinity of Jesus Christ. When it comes to the needs of society, about which there is constantly so much discussion, and in which the Christian is called to participate, there is one fundamental need which is almost always overlooked. That need is for God. God is what individuals and society need most of all. But it is precisely against this turning to God which secular man and secular society is typically so prejudiced. God is absent from the conscience and the consciousness of modern Western society, and there is an underlying suspicion that God is not really man's friend. It is suspected that God is not really good for society. So it is desired that he be out of sight, and out of the discussion.

He is a burden, and man is better off with him out of the way, or viewed in a way that makes him far less at odds and inconvenient. So it is that the secular world pursues its agendas without reference to God. This view of things is what the Christian, participating in the conversation going on about society's needs, must try to bring forward for radical reappraisal. Society's ills cannot be resolved till this is done. A new philosophy — one that accepts the Fact of God and of Christ as *public* facts that are good for man — has to prevail in the social mind, if society is properly to flourish. So, not only the individual, but also society must recognise sin and resolve to turn away from it. Society must convert at the level of the collective heart and learn to appeal to God for his grace and his help.

In his daily life in the world, the Christian ought remember that the society around him is called to be in Christ. But if this is ever to happen, both he and the society in which he lives and for which he works, must turn away from sin and believe in God. The Church's message is, turn away from sin, and acknowledge God and his

divine Son. Let us bear in mind the words of Ezekiel and apply them to our mission to society: “*Son of man, I have appointed you as sentry to the House of Israel*” (Ezekiel 33: 7-9). Let us be that sentry, with Christ’s love as our inspiration.

Further Reading: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*
no.886-889 (Conversion and society)



Monday of the twenty-third week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 119 (118):137, 124 You are just, O Lord, and your judgment is right; treat your servant in accord with your merciful love.

Collect O God, by whom we are redeemed and receive adoption, look graciously upon your beloved sons and daughters, that those who believe in Christ may receive true freedom and an everlasting inheritance. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 5:1-8; Psalm 5;

Luke 6:6-11

On a certain Sabbath Jesus went into the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. The scribes and the Pharisees watched him closely to see if he would cure on the sabbath so that they might discover a reason to accuse him. But he realized their intentions and said to the man with the withered

hand, “Come up and stand before us.” And he rose and stood there. Then Jesus said to them, “I ask you, is it lawful to do good on the sabbath rather than to do evil, to save life rather than to destroy it?” Looking around at them all, he then said to him, “Stretch out your hand.” He did so and his hand was restored. But they became enraged and discussed together what they might do to Jesus. (Luke 6:6-11)

Seeing Jesus There is a detail in our Gospel passage on which we could profitably ponder. Jesus is in the synagogue, teaching. Luke tells us that the “*scribes and the Pharisees watched him closely.*” All in the synagogue were watching the speaker, but the verb Luke uses of the scribes and Pharisees (*paretēroūnto*) conveys the idea of watching closely, especially with sinister intent — as in, say, looking sideways out of the corner of one’s eye (Plummer). Luke immediately explains: they were watching to see if he would heal on the Sabbath day, and so have a reason to condemn him. They were looking on the incarnate Son of God with hostility. In his Sermon on

the Mount, our Lord said, *Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see (opsontai) God* (Matthew 5: 8). The scribes and Pharisees were not “clean of heart” and could not “see” Jesus for who he was. They saw in him but a rival. Years before, the three Magi from the East arrived in Jerusalem saying that they had “seen” (*eidomen*) the star of the new born King of the Jews. They had come to see and worship him (Matthew 2: 1-3). Herod the Great was troubled, as was all Jerusalem with him. He told the wise men to inform him when they found the infant King at Bethlehem so that he, too, could go and adore him. Herod wanted to see the Child, but only to do away with him. Our scribes and Pharisees were watching Jesus, but only to do away with him. So there are different ways in which the Son of God is “seen.” At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus was “seen” by another person. We read in the Gospel of St John that “*the next day John sees (blepei) Jesus coming towards him*” (John 1:29) and his attitude is one of profound regard and humble praise. He said, “*Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the*

world.” John looks on Jesus and sees in him the Redeemer of the world. By contrast, Herod Antipas, hearing of Jesus, said, “*John I have beheaded And he sought to see (idein) Jesus*” (Luke 9:9). He did see Jesus during the Passion. We read that “*Herod seeing Jesus, greatly rejoiced*” (Luke 23:8). But Christ would not speak to him. These people “saw” Jesus, but with very different attitudes.

The goal of life is to see God. Our joy will be to see him forever in heaven, and the most terrible punishment of hell will be to be denied this sight forever. We are made to yearn to see God — and God is Jesus, just as truly as God is the Father and as he is the Holy Spirit. So our life’s goal is to see and be with Jesus. But as the Gospels show, we must yearn to see Jesus with a pure heart, a heart that is striving to love him with our whole being. It is a profanation to look on Jesus as did the scribes and Pharisees, or as did Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, who also desired to see Jesus. It is a profanation and a sacrilege. There is yet another instance when the people looked on Jesus. Pilate brought Jesus out and there he

stood, crowned with thorns, wearing the purple robe of mockery, and said: “*Behold (idou) the man!*” The chief priests and attendants looked on him and clamoured for his crucifixion (John 19:5). Again, when he was dying on the cross, Luke tells us that “*the people stood beholding. And also the rulers scoffed him*” (Luke 23:35). There are all kinds of ways man looks upon God, and God, in becoming man, allowed himself to be looked upon hostilely, and with sinful intent. We must look on Jesus as did John the Baptist, with profound humility and recognition. We read in the account of the first resurrection appearance of Jesus — to Mary Magdalene — that “*she saw Jesus standing, but did not know it was him*” (John 20: 14). Her heart was full of love, and Jesus immediately revealed himself to her: “Mary!” he said. Later in the morning, the risen Jesus quietly joined two of the disciples as they walked sorrowfully on their way to the village of Emmaus. Arriving at the village, they went inside, Jesus included. As he sat at table, “*their eyes were opened, and they recognized him*” (Luke 24:31). They recognized him

because, in part, of their faith and love. Their sight was true sight. But now, there is a higher sight than physical sight. It is the sight of faith. Thomas saw the risen Jesus and believed. Our Lord said to him, “*Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet believe*” (John 20: 29).

All our life we ought be aiming finally to see Jesus. We see him in our hearts by faith, and this contemplation of him in faith must be nourished by daily prayer, spiritual reading, the devout reception of the Sacraments, and a life of faithful Christian living. Our joy will be to see Jesus and to be with him forever in heaven. To see Jesus is to see the living God, for as he said, *to see me is to see the Father.... No one comes to the Father except through me*. If we believe in Jesus, if we hope in him, if we love him, if we obey and serve him, we shall see him by faith in this life, and see him face to face forever in heaven. Wonderful prospect! Joy forever!

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Second reflection:

Suffering with Christ The most perplexing and perennial of human problems is the problem of suffering. Suffering is so burdensome, and seemingly so pointless. Suffering can tempt a person to be angry with God, to refuse to accept God's commands, and even to reject the proposition that God exists. In terms of the attainment of happiness, suffering and evil constitute a great problem. Yet St Paul tells the Colossians that "*it makes me happy to suffer for you, as I am suffering now*" (Colossians 1: 24). So it is possible to be happy in the midst of suffering. What is it that enables Paul to be happy in the midst of suffering? The critical factor is that Paul sees great meaning in his sufferings: he is suffering for the Church as its "servant", "*to make up all that has still to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his body, the Church.*" Suffering is not pointless. St Paul shows us that, by means of our suffering, we are able to unite with Christ in his sufferings for the Church his body. We can "*make up all that is still to be undergone by Christ*" for the Church. By his grace,

Christ unites us in our sufferings to himself and enables our sufferings to serve the purpose of his own sufferings. The Person of Jesus Christ is everything for the Christian. He is *“the message which was a mystery hidden for generations and centuries and has now been revealed to his saints.”* That *“mystery is Christ among you, your hope of glory.”* The proclamation and extension of this message, and the hope it contains, gives purpose to the sufferings of the Christian: *“It is for this”*, St Paul writes, *“that I struggle wearily on, helped only by his power driving me irresistibly.”*

Let us then suffer as “the servant of the Church,” suffering in Christ *“for the sake of his body, the Church”*, so that all may become “perfect in Christ.”



Tuesday of the twenty-third week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 119 (118):137, 124 You are just, O Lord, and your judgment is right; treat your servant in accord with your merciful love.

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Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 6:1-11; Psalm 149;

Luke 6:12-19

Jesus departed to the mountain to pray, and he spent the night in prayer to God. When day came, he called his disciples to himself, and from them he chose Twelve, whom he also named Apostles: Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James the son of

Alphaeus, Simon who was called a Zealot, and Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor. And he came down with them and stood on a stretch of level ground. A great crowd of his disciples and a large number of the people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and even those who were tormented by unclean spirits were cured. Everyone in the crowd sought to touch him because power came forth from him and healed them all. (Luke 6:12-19)

The Twelve It is plain from the Gospels that our Lord was steeped in the Scriptures. Humanly, he thought and reasoned and taught with the inspired Writings in mind. He saw his own mission outlined in them, together with its crown and upshot, which was his Passion, Death, Resurrection and the sending of the Spirit. Every devout Jew looked back to Abraham as their father in the Faith, and to Isaac and Jacob. The original revelation was granted to them, and when God appeared to Moses in the Burning Bush he identified himself as the God of

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Though the promise had been made to Abraham that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed, in the time of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, their God was the God of a single family — their family. Abraham had a son by his wife Sarah, Isaac. He had a second son, Ishmael by the handmaiden Hagar, and Isaac was the child of promise, not Ishmael. The “Faith,” as we might call it, passed from Abraham to Isaac. By his wife Rebekah, Isaac had twin sons, Esau and Jacob. Again, Jacob (or Israel) was the child of the promise and the “Faith” passed to him. To this point, the revealed religion was the religion of a specially chosen family, passed from father to a single son — but with Jacob (or Israel) the situation began to change. Jacob (Israel) had twelve sons, and with that a nation began — a people whom the Scriptures call “the children of Israel.” They were the twelve tribes of the Twelve Patriarchs, who were the twelve sons of Israel. Each Patriarch had received a mission (from Jacob in Genesis 49). Each handed on the revelation given to Abraham, which would bring blessings

to all the families of the earth. The descendants of the Patriarchs were chosen in a new way at Sinai when Moses met God and a new covenant with the twelve tribes was established. According to the Book of Exodus, Moses himself was a member of the tribe of Levi. The original promise of a blessing to all the nations was borne along in history by the twelve tribes of Israel, children of the Twelve Patriarchs, all sons of Abraham.

So it is that Christ takes the special step, surely full of biblical significance, of choosing Twelve new Patriarchs who will be the bearer of a new revelation fulfilling the old. The new revelation will fulfil the ancient prediction of a blessing brought to all the nations (Genesis 12:3). The essential features are discipleship and mission. Our Lord selects *twelve* from among his disciples, and their calling is to be his companions and to share in his mission — a mission that evokes the ancient promise of a blessing for all the nations. Significantly, he calls them “Apostles.” The word, then, comes from the lips of Jesus Christ himself. They are to be his envoys, his ambassadors, his

representatives. A new people, arising out of and including the old, is to begin and it will be the fruit of a new covenant — the definitive and eternal covenant sealed in his blood. We ought ponder carefully on the choice of the Twelve Apostles. Especially notable is their title. They are to be essentially *ambassadors* of Jesus Christ, acting in his name, and on the move, bringing the news of him to the world. Christ would tell them that *all authority in heaven and on earth* was given to him. They were therefore *to go to the whole world and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them and teaching them all he had commanded*. He, then, was the founder of this people, the builder of this Church. Its Patriarchs were the Twelve. Their mission was to bring him, Jesus Christ, to both the “*lost sheep of the House of Israel*,” and to the world. There had been the “church” (convocation) of the Twelve Patriarchs, the children of Israel, and now there was to be a new “*Church*” fulfilling the old, and Jesus Christ would be its builder. The man at the head of the Twelve would be its Rock, the visible Rock on which the new people, the new “House”

would be built. To him would be given *the keys of the kingdom of heaven*. The whole world has the calling, all the nations have the invitation, to become disciples and to be baptized — and thus enter the Church. By entering the Church, one gains access to the Kingdom, for Peter has the keys. It is especially when we situate our Gospel passage (Luke 6:12-19) in the context of the Book of Genesis, the promise to Abraham and the Patriarchs, that we see that it marks the beginning of a new phase in salvation history.

The Twelve whom our Lord chose were fairly ordinary persons, it seems, and certainly they would have been otherwise unknown to history. In fact, the Church is overwhelmingly made up of ordinary persons, and each in his own way shares in the mission of the Twelve. That is to say, we share in the calling to be whole-hearted disciples of Jesus Christ, and in that calling, to do what we can to bring the knowledge and love of him to the world around us in our everyday lives. Let us resolve to do this then, and to our maximum capacity.

Second reflection:

True faith I remember when I was a child the boy next door said to me that “Catholics are mad!” By this he meant that anyone following the Catholic faith is foolish. Thinking back on that family (they were very good neighbours) I suspect that, both then and since, that boy had very little religious faith. But that does not mean, of course, that they did not have a faith of some kind, some system or range of values they believed in. The fact is that most people have faith in something or other, even though many do not appear to have much *religious* faith. I have met elderly persons who believe that beyond death there will be nothing. That, actually, is itself a faith. In any case, usually such persons do have some things they live for and believe in, even if only temporal and passing. The tragedy is that the God-given human tendency to believe is bestowed on what is virtually nothing. The fact is that one’s commitment to the Catholic Faith, as taught by the

Church our Mother, can be eroded and replaced by worldly and purely human thinking: a temporal faith. In his Letter to the Colossians (ch.2), St Paul makes this point when he writes, *“Make sure that no one traps you and deprives you of your freedom by some empty, rational philosophy based on the principles of this world instead of on Christ.”*

The Catholic bases his life on faith in Christ as he is preached and taught by the Church. Let this be our constant foundation, and let us be ever alert lest the foundation be eroded.



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Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 7:25-31; Psalm 44;

Luke 6:20-26

Looking at his disciples, Jesus said: Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.

Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets. (Luke 6:20-26)

The Beatitudes

We take for granted the ways Jesus Christ presented his teachings — the most notable way being that of the parable. In the Gospels, there are not many examples of abstract teachings that might be said to parallel the typical abstract approach of, say, Greek philosophy. Rather, in his speech and instruction, Christ used concrete imagery drawn from everyday life. In his mode of human thinking, he appears to gravitate towards likenesses and analogies. Superb in debate against all opponents, he had a profoundly rich imagination. For instance, he saw a likeness between the finery of the lilies of the field and that of Solomon in all his glory.

Importantly, he composed lots of brief stories — the parables. There are people with this gift. I had an aunt who had a wonderful facility for narrating stories. She rarely wrote, as far as I am aware — though I had heard that as a teenager she could write very well. She had a great facility for recounting events of her life, people she knew and incidents she had heard of. She had a vivid imagination and an excellent memory, and she was able to express this store of things very well in the spoken word. In fact, she could tell the same story over and over again at different periods, with the same audience, and still evoke the same delighted response. She scarcely ever told fictional stories of her own composition — they were all narrations of past events. I had a grandfather who, when I was a child, would tell us lots of stories. They were not events but his own creations. He told stories of his own devising. Both these people could tell a story. Christ, it would seem, excelled in the composition and telling of very short stories. His medium was not writing — as did certain other prophets (Isaiah 8:16), he left the writing to

his disciples. His medium was the spoken word — both to disciples and to the multitudes. Many of his stories told to the crowds he left unexplained, giving the explanation to his disciples in private. He also composed maxims, and, as well as this, often gave lengthy instruction without the use of stories. An example of this latter is his instruction on the Eucharist in the Synagogue of Capernaum (John 6: 25-65). Another genre of his teaching was somewhat *like*, I would suggest, poetry. The Beatitudes (of our Gospel today) is an instance of this.

The “Beatitudes” are two texts of the Gospels — that of Matthew and Luke — which involve brief statements or maxims beginning with *makarioi*, which the Latin translates as “*beati*.” The *makarioi* are the “blessed” or “happy” ones. They are, in Latin, the *beati*, who enjoy happiness (Latin: *beatitudo*). That is to say, in these two separate texts (Matthew 5: 3-11 and Luke 6: 20-26) we have Christ’s statements, cast in different forms, on those who possess true beatitude (*beatitudo*). So it is that these two texts traditionally have had the title of “the

Beatitudes.” Matthew provides us with eight such statements by Christ on being truly blessed, whereas Luke gives us four, with four opposite woes. One of the most striking features of Biblical poetry as instanced in, say, the psalms, is a parallelism of thought and expression. There is a similar rhythmic parallelism of expression in the Beatitudes. Christ’s human mind and imagination appears as Semitic, of a character similar to that from which had come the psalms. If we may say so without irreverence, had Christ the occasion for expressing his teaching in the genre of something like poetry, the production would have been unforgettable — as are the Beatitudes. In respect to the two texts, I regard the two different forms of the Beatitudes in Matthew and Luke as having both come from the lips of Jesus. They are simply his teaching uttered in different circumstances. Further, they are in profound continuity with the Scriptures before him. For instance, our passage today is from the Gospel of St Luke (Luke 6: 20-26). Early in Luke’s account of Christ’s public ministry, our Lord returns to his town of Nazareth (4:16).

There he went into the Synagogue on the Sabbath Day and, opening the scroll of the prophet Isaiah (4:17), quotes from Isaiah 61:1-2: “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me... to comfort all those who mourn.*” Christ proclaims that he is the fulfilment of this prediction. Now, there is a likeness between the Beatitudes in Luke (6:20-26) and this very text of Isaiah 61:1-3, which was used at Nazareth (4: 18). The lowly, the broken-hearted, the captives (Isaiah 61:1) and all who mourn (Isaiah 61:2-3), will be blessed (Isaiah 61:9). Isaiah 61 (used in his discourse at Nazareth) is recast later in the Beatitudes, as presented in the same Gospel of St Luke (Luke 6:20). Christ, addressing his disciples, is himself the Blessing, and those who receive the Blessing are the poor of this world.

Let us take the Beatitudes of our Gospel today most seriously and engrave them on our hearts. The general message is clear: let us prefer to be poor in what this world prizes highly and rich in what God wishes to give. He wants to give us himself in the person of his only-begotten Son made man. That, in the plan of God, is what makes

man blessed. We are poor. Let us recognize and embrace the fact. We can be rich, but we must make sure it is a godly richness, a richness that comes from God. We shall be such if we receive the grand Gift of God — which is Jesus Christ in whom is every heavenly blessing. Let us make him our life, then!

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Second reflection:

The supernatural In the mind of a secular-minded world, religion is generally regarded as irrelevant and in any case somewhat unreal. The “real” things are those things of this world only. For the last few centuries, philosophical thought has viewed with scepticism the very reality of the supernatural — despite the voice of mankind as represented in the religions of man. Well, St Paul confronts and contradicts this modern and Western tendency to dismiss the supernatural. He tells the

Colossians that they “*have been brought back to true life with Christ*”, as if without him life is not real and true. Having been brought to this true life that is life in Christ, they “*must look for the things that are in heaven, where Christ is, sitting at God’s right hand*” (3: 1-2). The Christian must seek those things that Christ wishes him to seek. In this way his thoughts will be heavenly, though he be grappling with the realities of this world.

Christ, St Paul tells the Colossians, “*is your life,*” and “*you too will be revealed in all your glory with him.*” This will be the true life, and that life begins now. Let us then put on the mind of Christ, and cast away from us everything “*that makes God angry*” (Colossians ch.3).



Thursday of the twenty-third week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 119 (118):137, 124 You are just, O Lord, and your judgment is right; treat your servant in accord with your merciful love.

Collect O God, by whom we are redeemed and receive adoption, look graciously upon your beloved sons and daughters, that those who believe in Christ may receive true freedom and an everlasting inheritance. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 8:1-7.11-13; Psalm 138;

Luke 6:27-38

Jesus said to his disciples: But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if

anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' lend to 'sinners', expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. (Luke 6: 27-38)

Love I wonder what Aristotle or Plato or Socrates would have thought of Christ's ethical teaching had they been in the audience when our Lord was speaking on this occasion about love for your *enemies* and for those who *ill-treat* you. The essence of his startling applications of this is that his disciples are to love their neighbour without expecting any return, even if receiving *ill-treatment* in return. Christ's "ethics" is this: "*do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.*" Now, this is nothing if not the reverse of what we naturally tend to do. If we make a gesture of friendship and compassion towards someone, we naturally expect that to some extent this will be returned. If not, we are wounded and resentful, and love is withheld. In respect to our fellow man, Christ asked of his disciples that they love even if rebuffed. The nobility of this would be apparent to

the natural conscience, but its motive may not be. Its motive is the *example of the God of revelation*. God, as he has revealed himself to Abraham, Moses, the prophets and above all as he has revealed himself in the Person of Jesus Christ, is love. In our passage today, our Lord tells his disciples to act as sons of their Father in heaven. *“But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.”* So those who wish to follow Jesus Christ must keep their gaze on God and on how he loves “the ungrateful and wicked”. The model is not the ideal man, as reason might delineate this ideal to be. The model is God who is pure love, God who became man to take away the sins of the world, God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Let us imagine Aristotle in the audience of today's Gospel scene, with his theory of the divinity ticking over in his mind — a theory to be used to such good effect by Aquinas centuries later. The divinity which Aristotle sought to understand and propose is, he wrote, the object of desire and of love. As the object of desire, the divinity moves the world (*Metaphysics*, III, 7). That was a remarkable insight. But what sort of character does the divine principle have? It lacks nothing, and seems to be solely the object of love. It moves the world by the desire and love it evokes for itself. It itself does not *love* man. One scarcely gets the impression from Aristotle's treatise that the Prime Mover is a great and loving Person. On the other hand, the one and only God — the Prime Mover as we might call him — in whom Israel believed because of it being revealed to Abraham, the Patriarchs and Prophets, loves with an intensely personal love. His love is an elective love: among all the nations he elects and loves Israel — and he does so precisely with a view to healing the whole human race. This is a revolutionary innovation

in the history of religious thought. In his Encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, Benedict XVI chooses to describe the love of God in terms of *eros* and *agape* — the love that desires a return and the love that simply gives. In man, it is *eros* that can so easily command the entire scene. God does *desire* our love, and in this sense his love for us can be likened to *eros*. He is not oblivious and unconcerned for our love, however much we might desire him. Rather, he *desires* our love with an intensity beyond imagining. But it is not for his own benefit that he desires it, but for ours. It is entirely suffused and transformed by the love that is *agape*, a divine love that seeks our benefit, the everlasting benefit that comes from loving God. That is the abiding and life-long benchmark for our life of love. Christ’s “ethics” is based on the life and nature of God as it is revealed in sacred history and the Scriptures, and above all as it is revealed in his own Person. Jesus Christ, as Pope Benedict XVI was fond of saying, is the human face of God. The model of the “ethical life” is the incarnate Son of God who died for a world of sinners.

As Socrates, Plato and Aristotle look on the Person who is speaking in our Gospel scene, they see before them the model of the completely “ethical life”. It is a life of love. But the Good News is that God has given to man the free gift of his grace to enable him to aspire to this noble life which is nothing other than the following of Jesus Christ, not merely in external behaviour but in one’s heart of hearts. One can now aspire to the overcoming of all that is mere *eros*, all that is self-seeking. By resolving to put on the mind of Jesus Christ, one may aspire to holiness and the divine life of *agape*. Man, called to be a saint!



Friday of the twenty-third week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 119 (118):137, 124 You are just, O Lord, and your judgment is right; treat your servant in accord with your merciful love.

Collect O God, by whom we are redeemed and receive adoption, look graciously upon your beloved sons and daughters, that those who believe in Christ may receive true freedom and an everlasting inheritance. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 9: 16-19.22-27; Psalm 83;
Luke 6:39-42

Jesus also told the people this parable: Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit? A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your

brother, 'Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,' when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye. (Luke 6:39-42)

Sight and blindness Some have described the speech of Martin Luther (1483-1546) at the Diet of Worms in April of 1521, as the birth of the modern world. On that occasion Luther defended his written attacks on orthodox Catholic doctrines and denied the right of the See of Rome to determine what is right and wrong in matters of faith. A source sympathetic to Luther's cause narrates his speech this way. Addressing the Emperor, he said, "I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted. My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, because it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience." Let us note Luther's appeal to his "conscience" as an inviolable authority. The papal nuncio at the scene, Jerome Aleander (1480-1542), recorded a final exchange between John von der Ecken, the principal

interrogator, and Luther, the accused. When Luther had given his answer and all were about to depart, Ecken called out, “Lay aside your conscience, Martin; you must lay it aside because it is in error, and it will be safe and proper for you to recant. Although you say the councils have erred you will never be able to prove it...” Notice the radical variance between Ecken and Luther in their understandings of the *conscience*. Luther said it was not safe to go against his conscience. Ecken said he must lay it aside, and that, on the contrary, it was the safe thing to do *because it was erroneous*. This is not the moment to discuss each understanding of the conscience, except to note that on Ecken’s Catholic side, the issue was not Luther’s sincerity. He did not presume to judge or condemn Luther’s motives. Ecken’s point was that Martin’s “conscience” was *erroneous*, and that yet, despite this, he was *still* able to know his duty to the objective truth. We could go back and forth considering and debating the matter of the rights of the conscience, but my point is simply to introduce the issue of sight and

blindness. Luther maintained that he saw. Ecken was convinced that he did not — and yet that *he was able to see if he chose*, and had a *duty to see*. In a sense, the whole of human life and all of society turns on the question of whether we see or whether we are blind.

In our Gospel today our Lord speaks of blindness: “*Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit?*” In the Gospel of St Matthew, our Lord speaks of the blindness of a number of the Pharisees who had taken offense at his rejection of the notion that what is eaten can defile a person: “*Let them alone,*” our Lord told his disciples. “*They are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit*” (Matthew 15:13). In our passage today our Lord speaks of one source of blindness: an unwarranted and unauthorized judgment on the spiritual state of another. “*Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven,*” our Lord had said a little earlier (Matthew 6:37). In our passage, our Lord speaks of the person with a “log” in his

own eye who presumes to see the splinter in his brother's eye. *"How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,' when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye"* (Luke 6:39-42). Such a person is a hypocrite, and is blind. So, he cannot see, and yet he is, to a point, responsible for his blindness. We remember how, hanging on the cross, our Lord prayed to his heavenly Father that he forgive them *"for they do not know what they are doing"* (Luke 23: 34). That is not to say that their "ignorance" was not to a point culpable, but our Lord's example illustrates one source, as emphasized in our Gospel text today, of both sight and blindness. The terrible thing about a sinful "blindness" is that it can mean that a person does not see the way out of it. He is responsible for it, and he has a duty to get out of it into the light. Sin takes one towards the darkness, and the point is illustrated, perhaps, in St John's remark about Judas Iscariot who *"immediately went out. And it was night"*

(John 13:30). Judas chose to betray Christ, and entered the darkness of his own choosing. It is a terrible thought. He had abandoned the Light of the world, and preferred darkness to light.

Every life turns on the issue of light and darkness, on being able to see or being blind. The world turns on this too. The one who is in the darkness thinks he sees. It is a momentous issue — for Satan thinks he sees, but he is engulfed in darkness. There is a great Light that has appeared in the world, and the one who follows him is in the light, while the one who refuses him is in the darkness. He does not see, even though his (erroneous and blind) “conscience” may tell him that he does see. Let us seek Christ where he is to be found, which is to say in the Church which he has “built” (Matthew 16:18). Let us never depart from him, but follow faithfully in his footsteps to the very end.

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Second reflection:

Gratitude A couple of years ago a priest whom I knew well died in another country. I heard that before he died, he expressed gratitude to God for the gift of life. Included in his gratitude for life would have been his gratitude for baptism and the gift of faith, together with the gift of a share in the Catholic priesthood. He was grateful. There is so much that we take for granted, and are not grateful for. We remember our Lord's words when only one of the ten lepers returned to give thanks for healing: *"The other nine, where are they?"* God expects us to be grateful. St Paul was grateful. We should be grateful. We might never have even existed. None of us needed to be. Granted we have the gift of life, we need not have been granted the gift of the Christian and Catholic faith. We might never have been placed "in Christ." All that we have is pure gift. As St Paul says in another of his Letters, *before the world began, God chose us, chose us in Christ to be holy and full of love in his sight.* We have every reason to be profoundly grateful.

Let us dwell constantly on the immense benefits we have been granted, and thank and praise God accordingly. Let us banish bitterness from our hearts and be filled with a holy gratitude for God's mercy.



Saturday of the twenty-third week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 119 (118):137, 124 You are just, O Lord, and your judgment is right; treat your servant in accord with your merciful love.

Collect O God, by whom we are redeemed and receive adoption, look graciously upon your beloved sons and daughters, that those who believe in Christ may receive true freedom and an everlasting inheritance. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 10:14-22; Psalm 115;

Luke 6:43-49

Jesus said, No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognised by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn bushes, or grapes from briars. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of

the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks. Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? I will show you what he is like who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice. He is like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When the flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built. But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete. (Luke 6: 43-49)

The good tree *“The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart.”* The pre-eminent exemplar of this is Jesus Christ, but there are many lesser examples of it. In August 2011 there was shown on Sydney television a program portraying the exploits of a couple of Navy servicemen who died in the Second World War, and who were being considered for a posthumous award of the Victoria Cross for outstanding bravery. One

was an ordinary sailor who chose to remain on his sinking ship in order to man an anti-aircraft gun and defend from the ship his companions who had, on orders, abandoned ship. From the sinking ship he kept firing at the Japanese aircraft, which, after having bombed the ship, were now attacking from the air the survivors who were clinging to flotsam in the sea. That lone sailor managed to bring down a few of the enemy aircraft as he himself sank with the ship. It was his own choice to remain on the doomed craft, and he did so because he saw that his numerous companions who, now in the water ahead of him, were being subjected to merciless fire from the air. The point was made by commentators that it was high heroism to take the step of remaining on board to operate the gun, when it plainly meant certain death. Right then his ship was going down. What did the sailor have in him that led him, enabled him, to do such a thing? Let us not try to answer such a question here — rather, let us be reminded of our Lord's words in today's Gospel. *“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each*

tree is recognised by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn bushes, or grapes from briars. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart.”(Luke 6: 43-49). Another example: during the same war, away in a concentration camp in Germany, the camp authorities selected certain prisoners to be shot in reprisal for others having escaped. One who was selected collapsed in fear. Out of the ranks behind him stepped forward another who voluntarily took his place. He was a Catholic priest — Saint Maximilian Kolbe. He died heroically, taking a step for the sake of another which he knew meant certain death. He was another instance of a tree bearing good fruit.

But the greatest instance of all this was Jesus Christ. Consider him. There was nothing good that Jesus Christ could not do. His powers over nature, over the underworld, and his power over heaven itself, had no limit. At a word he could remove any physical affliction, subdue the raging sea, feed the multitudes, raise the dead, strike terror in the demons, reduce his opponents to silence — he

could do anything, provided it was not evil. Had he chosen, the world would have been at his feet, as we might say. A strong inkling of this is given at the beginning of the Gospel when there is a meeting between him and Satan. Satan approaches and offers him the world, if he would but worship him. Now, Satan would not offer the world to someone who did not have it in him to be master of the world. Satan could see that in this man there was someone who had never had, nor would he ever have, an equal. He certainly could master the world — and if he, Satan, could get his allegiance, he would throw his demonic weight behind such a man's ambitions. All this, the kingdoms of the world, will I give you, he said to Jesus, if you will but worship me. Christ could do anything, and if he had had a mind for it, he could have had anything for the asking. Here we have a man with the utmost natural power who was possessed of the highest holiness. As his disciples said of him, and as the demons said of him, he was the holy one of God. The holy one of God! What did he do with his power, in the final analysis? How did he choose to exercise

it in the supreme moment? That sailor, that priest — how did they choose to exercise their freedom in the supreme moment? By laying down their lives for their companions. Jesus Christ saw the world — for the world was his, and he had come to his own — and saw its plight. It was sunk in sin and death — the wages of sin being death. He took the world's sin on his own shoulders and expiated for it all by his obedient sufferings and death. His sufferings were embraced by him in obedience to his heavenly Father in order to take away the sin of the world. We ought measure his sufferings not primarily by imagining the extent of suffering involved in a crucifixion, but by trying to imagine the weight of the sin of the world. It is unimaginable and incalculable. This is how our Lord used his great power.

The point, though, which I would like to make is that the archetype of the good tree bearing good fruit is Jesus Christ himself. We asked, what did that sailor have in him that led him to do what he did? He was an instance of the good tree that was able to bear the fruit of heroism. But how wondrous the tree, we might say, that was Jesus

Christ! He bore the fruit that was the redemption of the world by taking upon himself such incalculable sufferings, when he could so easily have done something else. Never was there a tunnel so dark as the one he chose to enter for our sakes. *Christ loved me*, St Paul writes, *and gave himself up for me*. Let us resolve to live in union with him so as to bear fruit, his fruit, that will last.

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Second reflection: (Luke 6:43-49)

The rock of the house It has been said that youth is the time of dreams, whereas later in life is the time of regrets. That, of course is a simplification, but it does bring out that with the years, there often comes the disappointment of past mistakes and unrealized dreams. For the enthusiastic Christian, the years will bring a deeper sense of personal sinfulness and limitation — and this is a great advance. The danger with youth is that one's hopes can so easily rest on oneself and on one's own powers. With the years comes the opportunity to base one's hopes

on God and his power. That is to say, disappointment with one's own powers and dreams, and the insights of greater experience, can offer the chance to entrust oneself with greater abandon to the saving power of God. St Paul tells Timothy in his first Letter to him that *"Here is a saying that you can rely on and nobody should doubt: that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. I myself am the greatest of them"* (ch.1). That is a saying we can rely on when we think of past disappointments, various failures, and personal sinfulness and limitations.

Christ has come to raise me up from all this, and to bring me to glory by means of my daily work for him. It is his power that will do it. I must begin again! I must pick up the pieces and start afresh, full of hope in the power of God. In the Gospel for today, our Lord speaks of the rock on which we must build the house. That rock is the power of God and his word, sustaining me in the doing of his will. The secret is to be ever starting afresh, full of hope.

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Twenty-fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Sir 36:18 Give peace, O Lord, to those who wait for you, that your prophets be found true. Hear the prayers of your servant, and of your people Israel.

Collect Look upon us, O God, Creator and ruler of all things, and, that we may feel the working of your mercy, grant that we may serve you with all our heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ecclesiasticus 27:33-28:9; Psalm 102;
Romans 14:7-9; Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times? Jesus answered, I tell you, not seven times, but seventy seven times. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him

ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until

he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart. (Matthew 18:21-35)

Forgive! Sooner or later every person will experience injuries. They are unavoidable. The hurt may be protracted and deep. It could lead to resentment, dislike, even hatred, and the desire for revenge, depending on a person's temperament and his awareness of this moral temptation. This is very human, and is an experience that is shared by people irrespective of religion or the lack of it. But the Christian is a disciple of Christ, one who learns from our Lord what God wants, and strives to put it into practice. *"It is not those who say to me Lord, Lord, who will enter the kingdom of heaven, rather the one who hears the word of God and puts it into practice"* (Matthew 7:21). If we want to build our lives on rock and not on sand (Matthew 7: 24-27), we must listen to our Lord's words and act on them. In today's Gospel (Matthew 18: 21-35) our Lord is asked by Simon Peter, *"Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me?"* Not just once or a

few times, but even many times (that is, as often as “seven times”)? Jesus answered, Not just many times, I tell you, but times without limit (that is, “seventy-seven times”). Our Lord’s command is that we forgive endlessly. It is especially this resolve and this capacity which will characterise the true Christian, one who is truly a follower of Christ. This is an immensely demanding requirement of true discipleship. But not only is it demanding: there is a lot at stake in its fulfilment, for our Lord tells us that God’s forgiveness of us will depend on our forgiveness of one another. Our Lord finishes the parable of today’s Gospel with the words, *“And in his anger the master handed him over to the torturers till he should pay all his debt. And that is how my heavenly Father will deal with you unless you each forgive your brother from your heart”* (Matthew 18: 35). In the Lord’s Prayer we are instructed to ask our heavenly Father that he forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. In the version of the Prayer provided by St Matthew, Our Lord gives special emphasis to this. It is presumed that in asking our Father

to forgive us, we have already forgiven those who have offended us (Matthew 6:14).

The tremendous question persisting in every life is, how can we possibly forgive from the heart, as we think of the injuries we have suffered? Anger persists, despite our seeing it and even wanting it to be otherwise. We find that we cannot do it. The sense of injury is constant and deep. Further, secretly we may simply not want to forgive, and we find that we cannot overcome this inner refusal. We can go through life never forgiving, and never wanting to forgive a particular person, or even several persons. Now, to the extent that we *consent* to this, and *refuse* to attempt genuine forgiveness from the heart, to that extent will God not forgive us. That is what is at stake. Much pins on this matter. Christ has revealed that to the extent that we refuse to forgive, our life in God will have reached an impasse. How, then, can we forgive? Firstly, let us remember that *our Lord wants* us to forgive. If we believe in Christ and in his gift to man of grace, we have a foundation on which to build our resolve to forgive all injuries. All things are

possible for God. Further, if Jesus Christ wants it, out of love for him we too should want it. We shall not be united to him if he wants something and we do not want it. That is to say, love for Jesus and the thought of his love for us ought lead us to want to forgive from the heart. The daily thought of Jesus ought lead us to the daily desire to forgive for his sake, and to be good children of our heavenly Father. Secondly, we ought remember all that God has forgiven in us, all our sins and failings. In the parable of today's Gospel (Matthew 18: 21 35), the master forgave the servant an astronomical sum of money — 10,000 talents. This was 60 million denarii, (according to Zerwick and Grosvenor in their *An Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, p.59), a denarius being a day's wages. But then this servant forgot his immense debt thus forgiven, and cruelly refused to forgive his fellow servant. It would have changed his life had he profoundly appreciated what had been done for him. Thirdly, we ought recognise our helplessness in being unable to forgive. We ought place our desire to forgive and our inability to do so in the care

of the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. He is our Sanctifier.

The Holy Spirit gives us the grace to put on the mind of Christ, to forgive as Christ forgave, to be like God our Father in his kindness to sinners, including to us who are sinners, too. Day after day we ought entrust our difficulty in forgiving to God and his grace, telling him we want to forgive, praying for the ones who have injured us. Each day we ought strive to forgive the more. Total forgiveness ought be the life's ambition of the Christian. By the end of our lives, how good it will be to leave this life having forgiven from the heart every single person who has injured us in any way. To do this we need God's grace and a resolute daily effort to do God's will.

Further reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.2838-2845 (Forgiveness)



Monday of the twenty-fourth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Sir 36:18 Give peace, O Lord, to those who wait for you, that your prophets be found true. Hear the prayers of your servant, and of your people Israel.

Collect Look upon us, O God, Creator and ruler of all things, and, that we may feel the working of your mercy, grant that we may serve you with all our heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 11:17-26.33; Psalm 39;
Luke 7:1-10

When Jesus had finished all his words to the people, he entered Capernaum. A centurion there had a slave who was ill and about to die, and he was valuable to him. When he heard about Jesus, he sent elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and save the life of his slave. They approached Jesus and strongly urged him to come,

saying, “He deserves to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation and he built the synagogue for us.” And Jesus went with them, but when he was only a short distance from the house, the centurion sent friends to tell him, “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof. Therefore, I did not consider myself worthy to come to you; but say the word and let my servant be healed. For I too am a person subject to authority, with soldiers subject to me. And I say to one, Go, and he goes; and to another, Come here, and he comes; and to my slave, Do this, and he does it.” When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him and, turning, said to the crowd following him, “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.” When the messengers returned to the house, they found the slave in good health. (Luke 7:1-10)

Prayer of petition I remember attending a lunch-time lecture at Sydney University in, I think, 1968, given by a senior lecturer in the Department of Philosophy. He was a Catholic priest, who, sadly, subsequently left the

priestly ministry. His lecture was on prayer and its efficacy, and he maintained that if one were to pray for rain, and if rain were soon to come following that prayer, then it was reasonable to suppose that the rain was the answer to prayer. The obvious objection was that, well, who was to say that the prayer was the only cause of the rain? It may have been a coincidence that the rain happened to come following the prayer — it may have come even if there had been no prayer for it. The room where he gave the lecture was fairly full, and there were two professors of Philosophy in attendance, both of whom I knew to be religiously agnostic. In the event, there followed an argument not so much between them and the priest but between the two professors of philosophy themselves, neither of whom would have agreed with the priest about the efficacy of prayer. At the time, that minor event of the lecture, scarcely ever to be thought of again, was yet another reminder to me of the importance of what we might call belief in a Particular Providence. If by “Providence” we mean the overall supervision of the

course of the world by the Creator, then a belief in “Providence” in this general sense would not indicate a very lively faith in God. Such a “God” scarcely touches the individual, rather it is the world that touches and involves the individual. Belief in a *particular* Providence is belief in God as caring for the particular individual. God exercises a particular care over him such that the individual can appeal to him and expect this particular care to be shown. It is this belief that will lead to the prayer of petition. My point, though, is that it is *this* belief that indicates a lively belief in God as a living, personal, objective reality. For all their protestations, I doubt that the old-time Deists had much of a belief in God precisely because they did not expect much of him in terms of particular, personal care. That Deism is with us still, but has led also to agnosticism and practical atheism.

While modern man typically relies on his own management of the world rather than on the personal care of him by the Creator, the man of classical times — I refer to man without revealed religion — did appeal to the deity,

or rather to the deities for their personal care. Typically, belief in a Particular Providence was common, as it is, for instance, in traditional indigenous religions. It is characteristic of man that he relies on the care of the Unseen and knows he can in some sense appeal to the higher powers for protection and aid. In this, the modern secular mind and imagination is an anomaly and an exception to the rule, even though it has been a tremendous gain that the independence of the world with its own laws is now appreciated. All of this brings us to our Gospel passage today (Luke 7:1-10), in which our centurion at Capernaum sends a delegation of friends to ask our Lord to come and heal his servant whom he does not want to lose. His friends who speak to Jesus clearly do not regard the centurion as one of the Faith (and there were many non-Jews who had embraced the Jewish religion), but he was a friend of their religion. He loved the nation and had built their Synagogue — perhaps it was the Synagogue of Capernaum. The point though, is that this pagan official obviously had a lively religious belief (whatever tenets it

might have involved) and this was shown in his faith in our Lord's ability to intervene with supernatural power and take care of his servant. As a matter of fact, he had very great faith and we know this from our Lord's own praise of him. We read that Jesus "*was amazed at him and, turning, said to the crowd following him, I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith.*" There was not the slightest doubt in the heart of the centurion that divine power was in the hands of Jesus of Nazareth, and that if his appeal was successful, his servant would be cured. Our Lord's words suggest to us that the pagan centurion had a genuine religious belief, that however faulty may have been his conception and image of the divine, he had a wonderful kernel of truth in his grasp. An important indicator of this was his lively faith in the particular care exercised by God. He certainly believed in a *particular* Providence.

If we truly believe that God loves us individually, and if we truly believe that God is the Creator and Lord of the world, then of course we shall pray to him for our needs as did the centurion who presented his request to our Lord. If

we never pray for our needs, or if we do it but sporadically and easily forget to continue when nothing *seems* to happen, what does this say of our belief? It says that we do not believe very much at all. Our Lord has something to say about this: he says that we are to *pray continually and never to lose heart* (Luke 18:1). We shall only do this if we have a lively faith in a real, objective, loving God who exercises a personal care over us. The greatest manifestation of this is the Person, the life and the work of Jesus Christ his Son, our Lord.

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Second reflection:

Prayer for others I knew one lady of advanced years who used to be constantly arranging for Masses to be said for various faithful departed. When at length she died, one person said to me that she was convinced that God had given to that lady a long life in order that those many

Masses for the faithful departed would be said. All people need the prayers of others, most of all the prayer of Christ himself — which is the Mass. Praying for the living and the dead is a great act of charity. There may be many things we are unable to do for particular people, but at least we can pray for them. The elderly and the sick can pray for others and offer up their sufferings for the benefit of others, both living and dead. If we work, then our professional work by means of which we earn our living, can be accompanied by our prayers for the ones we are serving in our work. The doctor can pray that his work will have success in the lives of his patients. The builder can pray for those he serves professionally. We ought fill our lives with prayer for others.

Let us fill our lives with prayer, prayer of adoration, praise and thanksgiving, and, very importantly, prayer of petition for everyone, and especially for those in authority.



Tuesday of the twenty-fourth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Sir 36:18 Give peace, O Lord, to those who wait for you, that your prophets be found true. Hear the prayers of your servant, and of your people Israel.

Collect Look upon us, O God, Creator and ruler of all things, and, that we may feel the working of your mercy, grant that we may serve you with all our heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 12:12-14.27-31; Psalm 99;
Luke 7:11-17

Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out — the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he

said, “Don’t cry.” Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. They were all filled with awe and praised God. “A great prophet has appeared among us,” they said. “God has come to help his people.” This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country. (Luke 7:11-17)

Do not weep That there is a great deal in life which is not to one’s liking, is, to say the very least, an understatement. Years ago a prominent Australian politician famously said that life was not meant to be easy — and he was pilloried in the press for his observation. Much in life is very difficult, and some things are appalling. There is famine, disease and above all, death. There is loneliness, frustration and the seeming lack of point in many things that happen. Some decide that, as God is normally defined (One who is almighty and all-good), he could not exist. If he did exist, things would not

be as they are. Many do not bother with the question. When faced with life as it is, the thought of God is for them an irrelevancy. God is far removed from their real concerns which are to make ends meet and to cope with a difficult life. He may exist but he is of no help. For instance, a young couple have their infant son — the joy of their life. Suddenly he is run over by a car and killed. The light has gone from their lives — and what use is it to talk of God? He is no help at all. Death is the pre-eminent human problem, and whether God exists or not, he makes no difference to that. One cannot live in the expectation that God will do something useful, and so life must be lived as if he did not exist. Will he, say, raise the dead or stop the deterioration of one's life? Of course not. The typical man or woman of the modern secular culture grieves when tragedy strikes, but he thinks that he must then get on with it, using his best wits to harness life, nature and the world. So it is that he thinks it is impractical to expect much from God. In view of this common experience, it is a moot question for many what kind of a

reality God is anyway. What is God? Well, who cares! He is of no help in the big things, nor, really in the little things. The world is the one Fact that one has to deal with in life, and it has its own laws which man must respect — or else! I suspect that it is this assumption that the world is the most substantial thing there is which fosters the modern prejudice against, say, the miracles in the Gospels, and miracles anywhere else. Miracles are unbelievable and a side-issue. The main game is the world and its laws.

In our Gospel today, tragedy has struck an elderly woman (and others, on occasion) in the village. There is no question in her case of any rejection of God — in a mass sense, the rejection of God is a modern phenomenon. Death has struck, and it is the only son of a widow. He is there, being carried out on a bier to the cemetery. Nothing more can be expected, and very little for the poor widow who has several years of difficulty and loneliness ahead of her. When Lazarus died and our Lord arrived at Bethany several days later, Martha said to him, “*Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*” No-one was

present to prevent the death of the son of the widow of Nain. There at the gate the body was being carried out for burial, when Jesus appeared on the scene. What followed was a revelation of how God views the situation. He views it with the utmost *compassion*, and he shows that he *is* a help, after all. It is entirely wrong to think that God may exist but he is of no help. *“When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, ‘Don’t cry.’ Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, ‘Young man, I say to you, get up!’ The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother”* (Luke 7: 11-17). The miracles of Jesus Christ, as portrayed in the Gospels, are obviously not meant to show what God will always do in the face of particular difficulties and death. Our Lord did not raise from the dead every person who died during his public ministry. He raised a few, and he did this to reveal the reality and nature of God. God is all-powerful and all-loving. He looks on our sufferings and deprivations with the utmost compassion, and the few miracles that occur are

windows into his attitude and nature. They show us that, if we obey him patiently, he will resolve all things wonderfully in the fullness of time. More, it shows our Lord's limitless power to do what is the most important thing of all, to raise us up from sin and to place us in his grace. This grace of God is a share in the life of God — grand, indestructible, eternal. God is our Help, but we must be patient. In all difficulties we must cling to Jesus.

If Jesus Christ spontaneously felt immense compassion for the widow of Nain and proceeded to restore her son to her, then despite all appearances he has good things in mind for all who suffer. He feels the same immense compassion for all who suffer that he felt for her. He will do good things for them, just as he did good things for her. *When* he will do it, is not for us to say. *What* he will do, is not for us to say. As St Paul writes, “*No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him*” (1 Corinthians 2:9).

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Second reflection: (Luke 7:11-17)

“A dead man was being carried out for burial, the only son of his mother” There is much evil and suffering in the world. Why there is this suffering is a great mystery, but there are many other great mysteries too. For instance, why is there not *nothing*, anyway? The reply of many to such a question as this, is that the reality we see around us simply is. It is just the fact — as if no further explanation is needed for the fact that things are. Others add that the presence of evil and suffering ought be considered in the same way — that this is just how things are. Reality has no ultimate meaning — this is just the way it happens to be. But man is instinctively religious and rational. He tends to look for some ultimate rationality in the universe. He searches for that rationality. But what the ultimate reason behind evil and suffering is, escapes him. For this, he needs light from above. In our Gospel passage today our Lord “*went to a town called Nain*” and “*when he was near the gate of the town it happened that a dead man was being carried out for burial, the only son of his*

mother, and she was a widow” (Luke 7: 11-17). Our Lord’s compassion was immediate. He stopped the funeral procession and, comforting the widow, raised the dead man and “*gave him to his mother.*” At a word, he made right the suffering that had come upon the widow. He had all the power and love to do it. Why did he not do the same for a great number of other widows at that time? We do not know. Why did he not put a complete end to other forms of suffering from which he released certain people during his public ministry? We do not know. Why does not God put an end to all suffering? We do not know. Anyhow, why did Christ himself (in the plan of God) have to suffer and only then enter into his glory? We do not know.

When God does hear the cry of the one who suffers by putting an end to a particular burden, he shows he has the love and the power needed to save. What we must do is have faith in him and sanctify our suffering in union with Jesus who, by his obedient suffering, saved the world.



Wednesday of the twenty-fourth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Sir 36:18 Give peace, O Lord, to those who wait for you, that your prophets be found true. Hear the prayers of your servant, and of your people Israel.

Collect Look upon us, O God, Creator and ruler of all things, and, that we may feel the working of your mercy, grant that we may serve you with all our heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:13; Psalm 32;
Luke 7:31-35

The Lord said, What description can I find for the men of this generation? What are they like? They are like children sitting in the market-place and calling out to each other: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not cry.' For John the Baptist

came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is proved right by all her children. (Luke 7:31-35)

Divine wisdom John the Baptist came, doing God's work in his appointed way. Jesus the incarnate Son of God came, doing God's work in his appointed way. There were very many who did not recognize the "wisdom" of God in them. We could consider the matter of *recognition* of the "wisdom" of God, but let us consider the very *fact* of God's wisdom and especially its *mysterious* course. John the Baptist was martyred, as was the very Wisdom of God, Jesus Christ. To all appearances, both met a sorry end. Why does God do things in the way he does, when there would seem to be a better way? Of course, Christ rose from the dead, but we are often confronted with the paradoxical character of the "wisdom" of God, that "wisdom" to which our Lord refers in our Gospel today. Ordinary human history offers plenty of

instances of this paradox. Take one instance from history. After the remarkable discoveries of the British sea captain, James Cook during the 1770s, and the publication of his journals in Europe, the French were led to make a similar attempt. In 1785 King Louis XVI assembled a scientific expedition of two 500 ton transport ships under the command of the distinguished naval commander Jean Francois de La Perouse. Their work was to travel the world making scientific discoveries. They set out from France in August 1785 and travelled via the Canary Islands, Cape Horn and Chile, then across the Pacific to Easter Island. They passed the Hawaiian Islands, then north to Alaska. At Lituya Bay in July 1786, twenty six of the party perished. They then sailed down to California, then to Macao, then to the Sea of Japan. Having reached the Russian settlement of Petropavlovsk, they sent a dispatch rider to Paris with La Perouse's journals and surveys (it took the rider a year to reach Paris). They then set out for Botany Bay, the site of the newly-established British settlement. Stopping at Samoa, several were

massacred by the natives. They finally arrived at Botany Bay on January 26th, 1788 — two and a half years after leaving France. There they stayed for six weeks. The plan was to return to France by the spring of 1789 — it would have been in time for the terrible French Revolution and the Terror and massacres that followed.

While at Botany Bay, part of what is now greater Sydney, one of the two scientist-priest chaplains died (Pere Claude Receveur), and his tomb is honoured at La Perouse in Sydney. The French would have celebrated the first Masses on Australian soil — at least the funeral Mass for Father Receveur. His tomb is the only formal memorial of the party — for the French Expedition, sailing off for more discoveries, was never seen or heard of again. It is thought that possibly they were wrecked off the Solomon Islands and killed by the natives. But now, my point is contained in one detail. On one of the documents concerning the Expedition, there is a list of persons who applied to join it back in 1785. Among the applicants was a young Corsican army officer, by name Napoleon Bonaparte. The

Expedition left in August of that year — the month Bonaparte turned 16. He had been interested in Mathematics. But he was rejected. Had he been accepted, he may have landed in Sydney. He may have been clubbed to death by natives at Samoa or the Solomons, or perished with the rest after leaving Botany Bay. He would never have been heard of again — and of course never noticed by history. Instead he went on to his meteoric rise to a brilliant career that caused mayhem and carnage, and a Continental war lasting more than a decade which brought death and suffering to untold numbers. He carried off the Pope as prisoner and was excommunicated — though he died on St Helena a Catholic and with the Sacraments. George Bernard Shaw a century later with his usual wit said that it would have been better had he never been born. The world would have presented a very different spectacle had he been accepted to sail with LaPerouse. What are the ways of God? God does things in his own way, and such is the “wisdom” of God, to which our Lord refers in today’s Gospel (Luke 7: 31-35). It will be proved right. Terrible

things are allowed, terrible things are perpetrated. Would it not have been better if the bomb that had been planted near Hitler when in conference had taken the evil dictator's life? But it did not — Hitler survived.

God is almighty and is all-wise. He has his ways, and his ways will be proved right, our Lord assures us. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ the Saviour proves this. So let us be ever confident, not that we shall understand the wisdom of God, but that in the end it will be proved right. As St Paul writes in one of his Letters, all things come together for those who love God. Nothing, neither life nor death, nothing, *can come between us and the love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ*. So let us always take courage — as our Lord commands his disciples from the midst of the storm. *Take courage! It is I!* Christ is always near us, and his wisdom, which is divine wisdom, will be proved right.



Thursday of the twenty-fourth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Sir 36:18 Give peace, O Lord, to those who wait for you, that your prophets be found true. Hear the prayers of your servant, and of your people Israel.

Collect Look upon us, O God, Creator and ruler of all things, and, that we may feel the working of your mercy, grant that we may serve you with all our heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Psalm 117;

Luke 7:36-50

Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his

feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is — that she is a sinner. Jesus answered him, Simon, I have something to tell you. Tell me, teacher, he said. Two men owed money to a certain money-lender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he cancelled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more? Simon replied, I suppose the one who had the bigger debt cancelled. You have judged correctly, Jesus said. Then he turned towards the woman and said to Simon, Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—

for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little. Then Jesus said to her, Your sins are forgiven. The other guests began to say among themselves, Who is this who even forgives sins? Jesus said to the woman, Your faith has saved you; go in peace. (Luke 7:36-50)

Repentance There is an old saying, “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” There are many early citations of this proverb, as in *The Proverbs of John Heywood*, 1546). Many of such citations refer to this proverb as an ‘old saying’. In John Fitzherbert’s *The Book of Husbandry*, 1534, we read: “...and he [a shepherd] must teach his dog to bark when he would have him (do so), to run when he would have him, and to leave running when he would have him; or else he is not a shrewd shepherd. The dog must learn it, when he is a whelp, or else it will not be: *for it is hard to make an old dog to stoop.* (italics mine, and put into modern English). By ‘stoop’, Fitzherbert meant ‘put its nose to the ground to find a scent’, as was the meaning of the verb in the 16th century. So the dog must learn these things when it is young, for it

is hard to make an old dog learn something new. Or again, in Nathan Bailey's (dictionary of) *Divers Proverbs*, 1721 (p. 72) we read of the proverb "An Old Dog Will Learn No Tricks" that "This Proverb intimates that old age is *indocile* and *untractable*; that if elderly persons have been put in a wrong way at first, the force of a long contracted habit is so strong, and their indisposition to learn and their aversion to be taught so strong, that there is no hope of reducing them to the right." The point here is that it is unwise to count on a new direction in old age — apart from grace. The oak that is fully grown is hardly likely to change course. I remember when I was a youth being told by a very good priest who himself was past middle age that the older one gets the more dependent one becomes on the habits that have been learnt years before. We are very dependent on what we have become, and what we have become depends on the decisions we have made in the past and repeated over time. I remember when I was a youth I had a great interest in art, and it was acknowledged that I was good at it. But numerous other pressing things came

my way — studies, exams, the path to the priesthood — and art fell by the wayside and I lost all interest in its pursuit. Occasionally in later years I considered taking it up again, but my serious interest in it had gone.

Such matters as art are not of great importance. What is important is the one thing necessary for human life — communion with God. There is one outer part of an Australian city where there is a relatively high proportion of retirees — people who have finished their careers of work and who are in retirement. This area is also notable for the higher proportion of its Catholic population who do *not* go to Sunday Mass. The parish consists of a notable number of older people, and the proportion of Catholics who attend Sunday Mass is smaller than is usual in the rest of the diocese. One might have hoped that with the years having passed and with not many to look ahead to, serious thoughts as to the Afterlife would strike home and lead to a greater religious practice. But no — the proverb is that “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” At least there is a special difficulty in it. I have often been stuck with the

number of very elderly (and good) people who have little or no religion. One's frame of mind is the product of one's years of life, and how difficult it is to change one's course the older one gets. All this brings us to our Gospel today (Luke 7: 36-50), which portrays the wonderful repentance of the sinful woman, and the pride of heart of the Pharisee. *"When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears."* Our Lord accepted her acts of repentance and sorrow for sin, but our question here is, how did she come by this repentance which led to Christ's forgiveness of her sins? Paradoxically, it was due to her *love*. She had been given the wherewithal, the grace, to love God and Jesus Christ, and this led to her tearful repentance before the Person of Jesus Christ. We know this, because Jesus Christ said so. *"I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven — for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little."* So, to repent we must be

inspired by a certain love for God (and an enlightened love of self), and this repentance will lead to an increase in love. The Pharisee did not love God much, whereas the sinful woman did — it was this that led her to repent so deeply.

It is unrealistic expecting a true and deep repentance from sin as life reaches its maturity and into its last stages, if there has been little effort to grow in the love of God. There is one hope for such a person — it is grace. Without grace, there will be no interest in repenting and making a new start. If we wish to grow in the spirit of repentance, if we wish to convert, we must make serious efforts to grow in the love of God. Repentance in turn will lead to an increase in this love. So let us pray all through life for an increase in the love of God, and let us endeavour to be faithful to this love. This is the best preparation for repentance as life increases, and especially as life reaches its end. It is the one who loves God who can be contrite: *“her many sins have been forgiven — for she loved much.”*



Friday of the twenty-fourth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Sir 36:18 Give peace, O Lord, to those who wait for you, that your prophets be found true. Hear the prayers of your servant, and of your people Israel.

Collect Look upon us, O God, Creator and ruler of all things, and, that we may feel the working of your mercy, grant that we may serve you with all our heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Psalm 16;

Luke 8:1-3

After this, Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the

manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means. (Luke 8:1-3)

The women In the Gospel of St Luke alone, there are some two dozen references to Jesus meeting a woman or talking about a woman or mentioning a woman in a parable. St Luke reports of certain women by name who were his disciples. Christ's faithful have always admired Mary of Magdalene, and she is celebrated as a saint in the Church's liturgical year. John depicts her standing at the foot of the Cross with the mother of Jesus (John 19:25). She is among the first, in John's account, to discover the empty tomb (John 20:1), and is the first to whom the risen Lord appeared and spoke (20: 15). Jesus directed her, a lay-person in the Church as we might describe her now, to announce the Resurrection to the Eleven (20:17). She was filled with love for her Lord. But Luke also cites other women with whom the Magdalene was associated. For instance, in our passage today he refers to Joanna, Susanna, and "many others." Consider,

for instance, Joanna. She was the wife of Chuza, the head of Herod Antipas's household staff. She had, then, direct connections with the Galilean court and may have personally known Herod, Herodias and the daughter of Herodias — the ones who had John the Baptist's blood on their hands. It seems that Joanna had received some form of healing from Jesus, for she is listed among the women *"who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases."* Joanna and her friends assisted Christ's travelling band in practical ways, and used her "means," as did others of the women, to support them in their consuming work. At times Christ and the Twelve had no time even to eat (Mark 3:20 and 6:31). Presumably the "means" Joanna provided included a portion of her allowance from her husband's court salary. The next specific mention which Luke makes of this faithful woman is on the day of Christ's Resurrection (ch.24). Obviously, she had been among *"the women who had followed (Jesus) from Galilee stood at a distance, watching"* his last hours on the Cross (Luke 23:49). She and they *"saw the tomb and how the body was laid. Then*

they returned, and prepared spices and ointments. On the Sabbath day they rested” (Luke 23:55-56). On the day of the Resurrection Joanna is cited as one of the women who told the apostles that the Angels had declared Jesus to be risen (Luke 24:10). Joanna, a person with high Galilean connections, cared little for the world. Rather, she loved and followed with abandon the crucified Christ.

That Mary Magdalene, Joanna the wife of Chuza and Susanna are mentioned by name as assisting our Lord during his public ministry, may also suggest a certain prominence or reputation of theirs in the life of the early Church. Luke refers also to another — to “*Mary the mother of James and the other women with them*” being at the tomb (Luke 24:10) — these are persons he knew of, perhaps knew personally, and perhaps had consulted in gathering his history. They are just names to us now, and at the time were ordinary persons who had come to know the Lord. That meeting with him, that knowledge of him and friendship with him became the greatest thing in their lives. It was, indeed, a new life and it set all of them on the

path to holiness, a share in the life of Jesus Christ. They were not among those who, having met Christ, received some blessing from him such as a healing, heard him and were moved by him, but who then, like those who left our Lord on hearing his doctrine of the Eucharist, went back to their own homes. They did not leave Jesus! How different from Judas Iscariot were these women! They stayed with him full of love and faith. Indeed, let us also notice this: the Eleven ran off in the Garden when Christ was betrayed. John followed Christ to the Cross on Calvary with the mother of Jesus, and Peter followed from afar. But the women were there. They gazed with grief on the death of their Lord, on his burial and the closing of his sepulchre with the stone. They were the first at the tomb early on the Sunday morning. They were the first to hear from the Angels the fact of the Resurrection, and they were the ones who brought the news of it to the disciples. Indeed, as said above, one of them, Mary Magdalene, was the first to have what we might call an open, public encounter with the risen Jesus. Christ had high regard for the faith and love of

these women and they must have received great graces from the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Their special friendship with Mary, the mother of Jesus, would have endured in the years ahead. It is inconceivable that, considering their open, constant and fulsome service of Jesus during his public ministry, their loving service of the Church would not have been singularly generous. They would have, like Mary Magdalene their companion, lived and died in the odour of sanctity.

Let us place ourselves in our Gospel scene today (Luke 8: 1-3) and contemplate these fervent disciples of Jesus among the women Luke takes care to mention. He need not have mentioned them, let alone mentioned them by name — but he did. Thanks be to him for doing this! It reminds us that every one of us is known and called by name to discipleship — to know, love and serve Jesus Christ here on earth, so as to see and enjoy him forever in heaven. Let this be our life, then!

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Second reflection: (Luke 8: 1-3)

“With him went the Twelve, as well as certain women...” Consider the beautiful Gospel scene of today with its picture of the Church in its beginnings. Jesus and the Twelve were constantly on mission proclaiming the Good News of the kingdom of God. With them went *“as well certain women, ... Mary surnamed the Magdalene .. Joanna ... Susanna, and several others”*. Our Lord accepted them into his company and they travelled with the large group, supporting them from their own resources. Contemplate the simple faith and love of those women, and the community life, let us call it, of the whole band. They loved Jesus and listened to his teaching, allowing it to permeate their minds and hearts. The Church was there in germ, gathered around Jesus. Countless ordinary faithful in one generation after another continue to associate with Jesus in his work as unseen head of the Church. They continue quietly in this company, giving of their means, living in his friendship, and listening to his doctrine as members of the Church. St Paul in the first

reading tells Timothy that it is this doctrine that must be taught and handed on. *“Anyone who teaches anything different and does not keep to the sound doctrine which is that of our Lord Jesus Christ, the doctrine which is in accordance with true religion, is simply ignorant and must be full of self-conceit”* (1 Timothy 6: 2c-12).

Let us live day by day with Jesus in the life of the Church, supporting in every way the work of the spread of the Kingdom, filling our hearts with his living doctrine as it is preached by those appointed to represent him.



Saturday of the twenty-fourth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Sir 36:18 Give peace, O Lord, to those who wait for you, that your prophets be found true. Hear the prayers of your servant, and of your people Israel.

Collect Look upon us, O God, Creator and ruler of all things, and, that we may feel the working of your mercy, grant that we may serve you with all our heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 15:35-37.42-49; Psalm 55;
Luke 8:4-15

While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no

moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown. When he said this, he called out, He who has ears to hear, let him hear. His disciples asked him what this parable meant. He said, The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that, 'though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand.' This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart,

who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop. (Luke 8:4-15)

Moral disposition A common maxim is that “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder” — a phrase which can be taken to stress the role of personal dispositions in the perception of external objects. Of course, some would choose to use such a phrase to express pure subjectivism: the philosopher David Hume wrote that “beauty in things exists merely in the mind which contemplates them” (*Essays, Moral and Political* 1742). Setting Hume aside, the importance of personal disposition in perception is immense. If a person is not disposed to hear, to see or to accept something, he may not hear, see or accept it at all. It is remarkable how different, one from another, various literary critiques can be. One critic sees in a work of literature considerable religious meanings, while another sees nothing of this but only a secular significance. The question then is, what is it that disposes one person to hear, perceive or accept something, and another not? There are many factors, but one of special importance is what one

wants and *chooses*. For years a person may be suffering from a perceived insult, one which he cannot bring himself to forgive. He sees it as having been unwarranted and grievous. But as a matter of fact, it may not have been an “insult” at all. Rather, it may have been nothing other than the objective truth, entirely warranted, and as a matter of fact not particularly grievous. Further, it may also have come from a person who actually loved the one who is now filled with a feeling of hostility. The one who is consumed with anger looks on the objective events with certain attitudes, and these profoundly affected his perception of them. These attitudes and dispositions which distorted his perception of what was said to him could have been moral, involving a choice for good or evil as the case may be. That is to say, one’s view of past events, involving bitterness at perceived injury, may be the *result of sin and sinful attitudes*. The man sunk in sin will look on the world, and judge its condition and significance, in a way very different from the saint. One may even venture to say

that the most important factor in one's perception of the objective world is one's inner moral condition.

It is in light of this that we ought consider our Lord's words in today's Gospel. At the end of telling his parable, our Lord says, *"Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown. When he said this, he called out, He who has ears to hear, let him hear."* Our Lord is letting his story stand, and inviting those who can hear it, to do so — he is insinuating the meaning and message of the parable. As already said, it is striking at times how various will be the interpretations of a novel, a drama or a poem. Some readers may be quite incapable of perceiving its moral and spiritual bearings. Our Lord is telling his audience that his parable has a meaning to it, and that a person must have the "ears" to "hear" it. His disciples asked him about the parable — they were listening, but wanted to know from him its true interpretation. In answer, he told them that the *"knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that, 'though seeing,*

they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand.’“ The minds of his disciples had been enlightened and endowed by “*the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God,*” which is to say by a knowledge of God, his will and his ways. They were attuned to understand, and had the interest to perceive. On this basis, our Lord proceeds to explain — reminding us that if we lack the moral dispositions which will enable us to perceive the meaning of what God has revealed, then that will block our reception of the grace God wishes to give us to do so. Our Lord is stressing the moral foundations of our perceptive power. The word of God will have its effect in those who can and will receive it. “*Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life’s worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear*

the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop”
(Luke 8: 4-15).

Let us ask persistently for the grace to be, at bottom, good soil. The fact is that where we are coming from can easily be hidden from our own view. We may be unaware of the fundamental principles which are shaping our judgments. But God knows them, and he can change them if they need changing. As God grants us light, let us act on that light and be faithful to it. If we are faithful to the grace granted us, more will be given. If we are not, even what we have may be lost.

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Second reflection:

Duty Cardinal Newman was of the view that what especially marks out the human being is his conscience or sense of duty. Every person is endowed with a sense of duty, though this moral sense can be almost snuffed out or even scarcely developed. But if it is

developed (and this is itself a moral obligation to do so) then, with the aid of grace, that sense of duty can guide a person to his perfection. So it is vitally important that a person do his duty — part of which is precisely to develop one's conscience. Our Lord in the Gospel parable today speaks of those who, being “rich soil”, yield a harvest (Luke 8: 4-15). They are those who “*with a noble and generous heart*” have “*heard the word of God and take it to themselves and yield a harvest through their perseverance.*”

We must persevere in doing our duty well, really well, the daily work God has given to us, doing our duty as perfectly as we can. St Josemaria Escriva taught that the path to sanctity consists in doing our work as perfectly as we can out of love for God and in this way making it something holy and acceptable to God.



Twenty-fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon I am the salvation of the people, says the Lord. Should they cry to me in any distress, I will hear them, and I will be their Lord for ever.

Collect O God, who founded all the commands of your sacred Law upon love of you and of our neighbour, grant that, by keeping your precepts, we may merit to attain eternal life. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 55: 6-9; Psalm 145:2-3, 8-9, 17-18;
Philippians 1:20c-24, 27a; Matthew 20:1-16a

Jesus said to his disciples, The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the market place doing nothing. He told them, 'You also

go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’ ‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered. He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’ The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. ‘These men who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’ But he answered one of them, ‘Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to

work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' So the last will be first, and the first will be last. (Matthew 20:1-16)

God is generous It has been said that youth is the time of hopes and dreams and late adulthood is the time of regrets. Whatever about that generalisation, when a person is young he or she will usually have hopes of a bright future — and it is a very sad thing if this is not the case. When that same person reaches advanced years, it will not be surprising if he or she has very many regrets. The danger will be that he may, as a result of life's disappointments, hope for very little as a result. In both cases, be it in the time of youth or in the time of advancing years, God's powerful grace can easily be forgotten. God means us to have the joy born of hope, but our main hope should lie not in our own strength and talents but in the power of God and in the free gift of his grace. In our Gospel passage today (Matthew 20: 1-16a), the master of

the vineyard goes out at various times of the day to look for workers for his vineyard. At those different stages he finds people standing idle and sends them into his vineyard, including those he found at the very last hour, the eleventh hour of the day. But what happened at the end of the day when the work was over? The last he employed received a full day's wage, one denarius, which was the payment received by those who did a full day's work. What is our Lord's point here? The point is that God will be generous even to the last one who hears the call of the master. "*Why be envious because I am generous?*" the master says to the others. If we respond to God's invitation we can count on his generosity, and God expresses his generosity in his gift of grace now, and in the reward of heaven hereafter. Grace is the special gift of God. It is by the power of his grace that God does for us what he has promised and intends. It is on his grace that we must depend whether we are young or old, and not primarily on our own strength. God is generous especially through his grace, and this is the message of today's Gospel. What then, is the grace of

God? When we refer to God's grace, we refer to our share in God's life and the help that continually flows from it. This supernatural help coming from God is his gift and it is undeserved. It enables us to respond to his call to live and work as his children.

At our baptism we are raised to a share in the life of the Blessed Trinity. We thus become members of Christ the Head of the Church, members of God's family which is the Church. This share in God's life increases with the faith-filled reception of the Sacraments, provided it is accompanied by the resolve on our part to live a holy life. Without the grace of God we would be sunk in our sins and quite unable to rise above the helplessness of our fallen human nature. This would mean that we would be unable to reach our homeland in heaven. This gift of God's grace is sanctifying, making us holy with the holiness of Christ. That grace is called habitual which confirms in us an habitual desire and capacity to live in keeping with God's call. It enables us to profit from God's various interventions every day of our lives. Those numerous

interventions of God we call his actual graces. They enlighten and inspire us to be more and more generous in fulfilling his will. Christ, by his death on the Cross, won for us a share in the grace of God, and it is on this grace that we depend totally for our salvation and sanctification. Mary the mother of Jesus was “full of grace” — as the Angel declared to her — and she was faithful to God’s grace in everything. She is our Mother in this and she can obtain for us more and more of the grace of the Holy Spirit. She is also our Model in what it means to live a life of grace. The one thing that matters is that we always be in the state of grace, which means that we always live in the friendship of God and do our best every day to avoid any deliberate sin. God is generous in his gift of grace, and this is a lesson from the parable of today’s Gospel. Let us resolve to try to avoid any deliberate venial sin, because that weakens and undermines the life of grace in us. If we sin deliberately, we ought immediately make an act of contrition, and confess it in our next regular Confession. I refer here to deliberate venial sin — let alone any mortal

sin, which strikes the soul dead and leaves it bereft of God's life. Let us then build up our life of prayer, our reception of the Sacraments, and our Christ-like service, ever looking to God's grace and learning to live by it.

It is the grace of God that will enable us to be faithful to his will and to our God given work in life. God is generous with his grace, so let us trust in the grace of God. In our Gospel parable today, Christ assures us that God will be generous, including to those who come at the last hour. Let us be ever hopeful, relying on God's generosity to bestow his grace on us, no matter how late in the day might be our turning to him. Let us ever and always be starting again!

Further Reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1996-2005 (Grace)



Monday of the twenty-fifth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon I am the salvation of the people, says the Lord. Should they cry to me in any distress, I will hear them, and I will be their Lord for ever.

Collect O God, who founded all the commands of your sacred Law upon love of you and of our neighbour, grant that, by keeping your precepts, we may merit to attain eternal life. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Proverbs 3:27-34; Ps. 14; Luke 8:16-18

No one lights a lamp and hides it in a jar or puts it under a bed. Instead, he puts it on a stand, so that those who come in can see the light. For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open. Therefore consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be

given more; whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken from him.” (Luke 8:16-18)

How you hear Looking back with a present Catholic perspective, the Protestant Reformation of the two centuries from John Wycliffe (1328-1384) to John Calvin (1509-1564) gave two great reminders: the high importance of Sacred Scripture, and the centrality of faith. Wycliffe formulated one of the two great formal principles of the Reformation — the unique authority of the Bible for the belief and life of the Christian. He also recognised the other great Reformation doctrine, that of justification by faith, though not fully worked out in the form of Luther and Calvin. I say it gave a great reminder, for they were condemned by the Catholic Church for what their doctrines lacked, and for the particular form their doctrines took. That having been said, it is agreed that the Christian life and the life of the Church flourish when Holy Scripture and faith in Jesus are its life. In our Gospel passage today our Lord speaks of *“how you listen”* to the word of God that comes from his lips. *“Therefore consider carefully how*

you listen. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken from him” (Luke 8:16-18). Our passage today immediately follows our Lord’s important parable of the sower going out to sow his seed. Our Lord tells his parable (Luke 8: 4-8), makes an immediate appeal to all his hearers that *“anyone with ears to hear, let him hear”* (8:8), and then comments on those who *“understand”* (8:9-10). Our Lord sees that many do not have ears with which to hear. Though they look, they do not perceive. Though they listen, they do not understand (8:10). To his disciples, though, *“it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God”* (8:10). So the first thing is that an inner attitude is necessary if the word of God which Christ proclaims is to be truly heard and understood. This inner attitude is a grace — it is given from above. Our Lord is speaking of the grace of faith — that faith in him that leads to the acceptance of his word with an understanding of its bearings for life. But then our Lord explains to his disciples what his parable meant. The seed, which is the

word of God, can produce a harvest, but it must be received in “*good soil,*” and “*these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold to it and bear fruit with patient endurance*” (Luke 8:15).

Those who “*hear the word,*” then, must hear with obedience. They must do something about it. They have a work to do: it is to hold to the word, and bear fruit with endurance. Merely hearing the word will not do — one must then act on it. This is the setting of our Gospel passage today (Luke 8:16-18), in which our Lord speaks of what the one who has heard the word must do. It is not to be merely heard as a private event, passively received, for “*no one after lighting a lamp hides it under a jar, or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a lampstand, so that those who enter may see the light*” (8:16). In Psalm 36: 9 we read that in “*your light (i.e., revelation) we see light,*” and in Psalm 119:105, that “*your word is a lamp to my feet, a light to my path.*” The word of God which we hear we must put on a lampstand, so that others may see their way. The “*lampstand*” is how we live. As St Matthew records it:

“your light must shine before men so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). The word of God, heard with faith and understanding by the disciple, is not meant to be hidden but to be brought out into the open so that others may also hear the word of God and bear fruit with patient endurance. But it all hinges on *“how you hear.”* We must hear with the faith that shows itself in how we live, and with the good works that mark the life of faith. It is an essential feature of the life of faith that the one who believes hold to the word and bear this fruit. That is what he must do — otherwise he will be like the path or the rock or the thorns in the parable. It received the word without bearing fruit, for the word could not take root and bear its fruit. For this reason it is absolutely crucial that, with the aid of grace, we who are disciples of Christ and who recognize his word as coming directly from God, be up and *doing*. We have a choice: we can *act* on the word we have heard, or we can *fail to act*. We must act, and with absolute generosity — and this we shall be able to do with the grace of God. This

is the way we are to hear the word of God. As our Lord says: *“consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken from him”* (Luke 8:16-18).

So then, it is not just a matter of believing what we hear. We must be up and doing, bearing fruit with patience. The “fruit” is above all that of personal holiness — the external results in terms of its effect on others we must, having done our best, in large measure leave to God. As St Paul writes, *“the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”* It is to have *“crucified the flesh with its passions and desires”* (Galatians 5:22-24). There is a lot to do here, and we can do it by the grace of God.

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Second reflection: (Luke 8:16-18)

“So take care how you hear; for anyone who has will be given more” There is one scene in the Passion of our Lord we ought consider: it is his meeting with Herod. Pilate decided to send our Lord to Herod, perhaps to avoid his responsibility. Herod was delighted as he had wanted to see and hear our Lord for some time. He had heard a lot about him, and was very curious. But our Lord refused to say a word. Herod plied him with questions and wanted him to work a miracle. But our Lord maintained his stony silence. Herod wanted to see and hear, but his entire attitude was sinful. That is one instance that exemplifies what our Lord warns in today’s Gospel: *“Take care how you hear; for anyone who has will be given more; from anyone who has not, even what he thinks he has will be taken away.”* On another occasion our Lord said, *“It is not those who say to me, Lord, Lord, who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but rather the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.”* Our hearing of the word of God in Scripture and in the life and Tradition of the

Church must be filled with the desire to do God's will, to put that word into practice. In this we have constantly before us in the life of the Church the example of Mary, the Church's mother and model. She heard the word, and said, "*Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to your word.*" Let us yearn to hear and understand the word of God so as to be able obediently to put it into practice in our daily life. In this way our ordinary life will achieve its grandeur, as did the ordinary life of Mary, of Joseph, and of our Lord during those thirty years at Nazareth when together they lived the ordinary life of typical townspeople.

Let us take care how we hear (Luke 8:16-18). If we have the attitude which God expects in his children, we shall be given more. If we do not, even what we think we have will be taken away.



Tuesday of the twenty-fifth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon I am the salvation of the people, says the Lord. Should they cry to me in any distress, I will hear them, and I will be their Lord for ever.

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Scripture today: Proverbs 21:1-6.10-13; Psalm 118;

Luke 8:19-21

Now Jesus' mother and brothers came to see him, but they were not able to get near him because of the crowd. Someone told him, Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you. He replied, My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice. (Luke 8:19-21)

Hearing and doing

In the Gospel of St Luke, no other disciple of Jesus Christ accompanied him to the extent of Mary his mother. Her involvement with him began before he was born: the Angel told her that “*you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus*” (Luke 1: 31). She heard the word that came from God, accepted it in faith and put it into practice: “*“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’ Then the angel departed from her*” (Luke 1: 38). Her kinswoman Elizabeth praised her especially for her faith in the word of God uttered to her: “*blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord*” (Luke 1: 45). Mary herself accepts and exults in what God does for her: “*the Mighty One has done great things for me and holy is his name*” (1: 49). At Bethlehem, “*the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger*” (2: 6-7). Hearing from the shepherds what had been said of the Child, “*Mary treasured all these*

words and pondered them in her heart” (2:19). Together with Joseph she “*brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord*” (2:22), and from Simeon she heard the prophecy that “*a sword will pierce your own soul too*” (2:35). Then “*when they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth*” (2: 39). Many things she did not understand, but she continued with constant faith and obedience. Finding her Son in the Temple after three days, Luke tells us that “*they did not understand what he said to them... (and) His mother treasured all these things in her heart*” (2: 50-51). These precious references to Mary occur within Luke’s infancy narrative and they give us the most copious presentation of the mother of Jesus provided in any Gospel. She is a most holy and humble believer, completely given over to the plan of God. In Luke’s Gospel, our Lord is reported as referring indirectly to his “mother” on two occasions during his public ministry. One is the incident reported in our passage today, and the other occurs when a woman from the crowd cries out in

admiration of him, saying that the woman who bore him is blessed.

So then, in view of what Luke has shown of Mary the mother of Jesus during the hidden years of his infancy and youth, we may assume that Luke seized on these two incidents as precious in their implications for Christ's greatest though hidden disciple. Our Gospel passage today (Luke 8: 19-21) has its parallel in Matthew 12:46-50 and in Mark 3:31-35. We immediately notice, though, a difference in two details. In each of the three Synoptics, "*his mother and his brothers*" come and await him outside, wanting to speak with him. In Matthew and Mark, Christ gestures towards his disciples (Matthew has our Lord pointing to them, Mark has our Lord looking at them) and says "*Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven (Mark has "God") is my brother and sister and mother!*" But in Luke's report, there is no mention of our Lord pointing to the disciples in front of him. He is told that "*your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you.*" Our Lord simply

makes a general, universal statement: “*My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it*” (Luke 8:20-21). It is as if Luke, in omitting the reference to the immediate circle of disciples in front of our Lord, is showing that Christ intended his response to be of universal application. Moreover, inasmuch as the mother of Jesus featured so prominently at the outset of his Gospel, Luke’s inclusion of Christ’s reference to his mother on this occasion is surely very deliberate. Luke wished to highlight a fundamental feature of the life of Mary the mother of Jesus. The universal statement *especially* applies to *Mary*. But there is a further detail. We notice that Luke does not simply have “*whoever does the will of my Father in heaven (or “God”),*” but rather “*those who hear the word of God and do it*” (Luke 8:21). That is to say, Luke emphasises both the *hearing* and the *doing* of the will of God — in line with the emphasis of the important parable of the sower, the seed and the good soil that precedes this maxim (Luke 8: 4-18). A major stress was given by Christ on “*how you hear.*” Pay attention, he

had said, to “*how you hear, for to those who have, more will be given*” (Luke 8:18). This is exactly what Luke has shown in his portrayal of the mother of Jesus — she first heard the word admirably, and obeyed it admirably.

Mary knew how to *hear*, and she *heard*. She treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart. Having heard to perfection, she did what was asked of her: *Behold the servant of the Lord. Be it done to me according to your word.* Let us look on Mary with trust, appealing to her for her motherly intercession. Let us entrust ourselves to her heavenly care, asking that she obtain for us the grace to be good soil, able to hear the word of God and put it into practice. It is thus that we shall bring forth in patient endurance the harvest intended by God.

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Second reflection:

Christ and the Temple When we consider the history of human societies and cultures we cannot but notice what is virtually the universal presence of religion. Man could be described as, yes, a “rational animal,” but also as a “religious animal.” He worships and he prays. Cities and towns show the presence of places of worship — temples. The temple gathers the community and houses its religious life, and is always a notable feature of man in community. All this is a pointer to the religion that God would reveal, for one of the features of revealed religion is the great emphasis placed on the Temple of God. In the Old Testament book of Ezra, King Darius orders the reconstruction of the Temple of God in Jerusalem. No pains are to be spared in the work of its restoration. Detailed descriptions are given of the work and efforts that went into it. The prophet Haggai’s mission was to inspire the task ahead. During the whole life of the chosen people of God up to and including the life of our Lord himself, the Temple was of the utmost importance in the revealed plan

of God. In a moment of high drama, Christ cleansed the Temple out of zeal for his Father's House. As we think of the place of the Temple in the religion of the Old Testament, let us remember its even greater emphasis in the New. Our Lord described himself as a Temple: *"destroy this temple and in three days I shall raise it up."* John explains: He was referring to the Temple that was his body. The Christian Church has its focus in the place of worship where Christ resides in his Tabernacle. The Eucharist is celebrated, and then reserved there, and the Eucharist is the summit and the source of the entire Christian life, both of the Church and of the individual member of the Church.

Let us resolve to consider the church where we live, the church wherein dwells the Eucharistic Jesus, as the centre and focus of our lives, and of the life of our parish. To do this is in accord with the plan of God for the religion he revealed.



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Scripture today: Proverbs 30:5-9; Psalm 118; Luke 9:1-6

When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. He told them: Take nothing for the journey— no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there until you leave that town. If people do not welcome you, shake the

dust off your feet when you leave their town, as a testimony against them. So they set out and went from village to village, preaching the gospel and healing people everywhere. (Luke 9:1-6)

Mission One of the most obvious characteristics of Christ's public ministry from its beginning was its forward *outreach* to the multitudes. He himself went out all over the country to the "*lost sheep of the House of Israel*", and he sent his disciples, most especially the Twelve, out ahead of him. They were bound to him not only by their friendship with him and their acceptance of his authority and teaching, but also by their share in his mission. Their task was to announce, with him and ahead of him, the imminence of the Kingdom of God. This promised Kingdom was inextricably linked with Jesus their Master and Lord. The first contact which some of them had with him in a Messianic sense followed his baptism by John and prior to the formal commencement of his mission. Two of the Baptist's disciples, Andrew and (probably) John, stayed with him after John had pointed to Jesus as the

Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. They came away full of the realization that he was the Messiah, the One about whom Moses and the Prophets had written. Even at this preliminary stage, there was a hint of the mission ahead. Andrew brought his brother Simon to Jesus, and Jesus declared then that Simon would have the name and title of “Rock” (John 1:42) — and it is Matthew who tells us of Christ’s formal designation of Simon as the Rock on which he would build his Church (Matthew 16: 18). Once Christ’s public ministry began, the involvement of his disciples in his mission became manifest. In the Gospel of St Matthew, following his baptism, his temptations in the wilderness and John the Baptist’s arrest, our Lord returned to Galilee and *“from that time Jesus began to preach...”* The next thing we read is his call to Simon and Andrew — and to them he says, *“Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men”* (4:17-19). With that, *“he went about all Galilee, teaching ... and preaching .. and healing”* (4:23). He did not set up in a favoured locality attracting disciples and crowds. He went out and

sought disciples and the crowds and eventually the world. His mission was to reach all and this missionary action was essential to discipleship. It was so from the very beginning.

While it is true that from the *beginning* of revealed religion — which is to say, from the call of Abraham — there was a world dimension to the promises, there was not a missionary impulse evident at the beginning. When Abraham received the command to “*Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land I will show you*”, he received a tremendous promise. It was that “*I will bless you, and make your name great, ... and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves*” (Genesis 12:1-3). But he received no commission or command to go and spread word about it among “all the families of the earth”. What was necessary was that Abraham and his descendants remain utterly faithful to it. It remained a family belief for generations, even perhaps during the Egyptian period as the twelve tribes grew. A new and most significant beginning occurred with

the mission of Moses and the covenant of Sinai, but I would not say that even then its distinctive note was a missionary one. The chosen people had a mission that was ultimately for the world. As our Lord would say to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well, "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22). The coming Blessing was for all the families of the earth — but the Jews did not take the step of bringing this announcement to the nations. They spread among the nations, but in response to circumstances (as a diaspora) rather than because of a missionary impulse. They drew others into their fold by force of a natural spread and an edifying contact with them. The prophets announced the word they had received, and presumably gathered disciples (Isaiah certainly did), but they did not, broadly speaking, instil a notable missionary spirit among them. At least this was not a distinctive note in Judaism. John the Baptist was a prophet but not what we would commonly call a *missionary*, nor were his disciples. But the case was utterly different with Jesus Christ. He travelled everywhere within the geographical boundaries of

the House of Israel, and he gave to his disciples a firm training and a pressing expectation in the work of *forward outreach*. It is this which, among other things, we are especially reminded of in our Gospel today.

This aspect of the Person, the life and the mission of Jesus Christ attained its clearest manifestation when he rose from the dead. It is a dominant note in each of the Gospels. In Matthew, the risen Jesus tells his disciples that *“all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations ... and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age”* (28:18-20). In Mark, our Lord tells them, *“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation”* (16:15). No prophet or king before Jesus Christ had done this. The point is this. If we wish to be disciples of Jesus Christ and please God by doing his holy will, it will mean actively endeavouring to bring the Blessing to the world around us — and that Blessing is Jesus, the Saviour of all.



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Scripture today: Ecclesiastes 1:2-11; Psalm 89; Luke 9:7-9

Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was going on. And he was perplexed, because some were saying that John had been raised from the dead, others that Elijah had appeared, and still others that one of the prophets of long ago had come back to life. But Herod said, I beheaded John. Who, then, is this I hear such things about? And he was eager to see him. (Luke 9:7-9)

Perplexity Luke tells us that Herod the tetrarch of Galilee, who at Herodias's instigation had put John the Baptist to death, began to hear "all" (these things) about Jesus. Herod was "in perplexity" about it. We are also told of some of the things that were being said — the rumours were rife. Jesus was one of the prophets come back to life — John, or Elijah, or one of the other ancient prophets. Herod could not understand what was going on — but he was eager to see someone who might be back from the dead and a wonder-worker. Luke tells us later that when Pilate found no fault in Jesus (Luke 23:4) during his trial, he sent him to Herod. The tetrarch of Galilee was *"highly delighted, for he had long desired to see him because he had heard many things about him, and hoped to see some miracle worked by him"* (Luke 23: 8). In our passage today, Herod is in a state of "perplexity," and his perplexity was a factor of his moral degradation, rendering it probably impossible for him to attain the truth. Let us consider "perplexity" — for there are many other forms of perplexity about religious truth and the Person and teaching

of Christ. For instance, one of St Mary MacKillop's dearest and most faithful friends during Mary's turbulent reversals in Adelaide was a non-Catholic. This admirable lady frankly admitted to Mary her religious scepticism. It was not a scepticism that she herself formally and consciously chose. It was an affliction, an unintended barrier to the faith which she so admired in Mary MacKillop. She too was "perplexed" at the thought of the Person of Jesus and the Catholic Church. But she was manifestly a good person, one of Mary MacKillop's best supporters, and a valued friend of the saint. As far as I am aware, her scepticism remained with her to the last. Apart from the fallen condition common to all, her religious "perplexity" was utterly different from the "perplexity" of the evil Herod. Such a person as she illustrates the Church's teaching that the "faith" which brings religious certitude is a gift from above. It is instanced in Simon Peter's grasp of the fact that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. This was not from "flesh and blood" but was a gift from the Father in heaven.

I remember reading an article by a leading philosopher in Australia — he held the chair of Philosophy in an Australian university — who described himself as a “theist” at the outset of his article. As a matter of fact, I knew he was a Catholic. He gave it as his opinion that philosophical speculation alone would not bring certitude in respect to the reality of God. His view was that in real life, rational processes alone would not take a person beyond scepticism in respect to religious realities. I was once watching an interview with a leading American scientist whose thought also led him to the consideration of religion. He narrated how one of his friends — a Catholic priest — had asked him what was holding him back from being a Christian. He told his priest-friend that faith was a gift, and he did not have that gift. I suspect that his reply to the priest was given in irony — it was a reply that used Catholic teaching to add a certain aura to his own scepticism, which he did not show any desire to discard. Or again, after an academic career of philosophical atheism, the British philosopher Antony Flew (1923—

2010) declared that he was a “theist.” What this meant was that he accepted a Mind that accounted for the design that he saw everywhere, especially the design present in the basic components of life. One could not help but rejoice that this eminent and influential thinker — who was repaid with scorn for this admission by his academic fellow-atheists — had moved significantly from the intellectual desert in which he had for so long wandered. But how little was the distance he covered when compared with, say, a profoundly religious wife and mother at the end of her long and deeply religious life! There is no scepticism in her! There is no doubt in her as to the great being of God, nor as to his Son the Redeemer, nor as to the Redemption he effected by his Cross and Resurrection, nor as to the Church his creation, nor as to the one and only thing that matters — union with Jesus. Her faith is the answer to the characteristic scepticism and perplexity that binds fallen man when faced with God and his divine revelation. Her faith is God’s gift. It is the faith of Simon Peter, who

declared before Jesus Christ that he is *the Messiah, the Son of the Living God*. Her faith gives her life eternal.

Herod heard of Jesus Christ, and was “in perplexity.” From generation to generation, man will hear of Jesus Christ from the Church and the Church’s children. Jesus Christ is the only way to the Father, indeed to look on him is to look on the Father. He and the Father — utterly distinct as Persons though they be — are one in being and love. If man relies purely on his own resources, purely on “flesh and blood” in what he makes of this testimony, then he will be “perplexed.” He must ask aid from God above, and ask humbly and persistently. The greatest of blessings is that of divine faith enabling him to overcome his natural scepticism, and to believe. The gift of faith is the answer to scepticism.

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Second reflection: (Luke 9:7-9)

“But Herod said, ‘who is this I hear such reports about?’ And he was anxious to see him.” Herod was desirous to see Jesus. He *“had heard about all that was being done by Jesus”*, and there were various views as to who he was. Eventually he did see Jesus when, during his Passion, Pilate sent our Lord over to him to be judged. But our Lord refused to speak to him. Herod was granted no relationship with our Lord at all because his dispositions were utterly unworthy of it. We are reminded of that parable our Lord told of the master inviting numerous people to the wedding feast. When the master came in one was found not wearing a wedding garment. He was cast outside into the darkness. By contrast, consider Zacchaeus the leading tax collector in Jericho when our Lord was passing through. He wanted to see Jesus too, and because he was short of stature he ran ahead of the crowd and climbed the tree to get a better view of our Lord who was to pass by that way. When our Lord reached the tree he looked up, saw Zacchaeus, and himself spoke and began

the relationship. He asked Zacchaeus to come down as he was to dine in his house that day. Zacchaeus hurried down and welcomed the Lord, joyfully promising to change his whole way of life. Our Lord rejoiced at the saving of a soul, *“because this man too is a son of Abraham.”* Zacchaeus had the dispositions our Lord was looking for, and which Herod manifestly lacked. What were those dispositions? Obviously one was faith, but also the sense of sin and the readiness to repent. He recognised in our Lord and in friendship with him the answer to the need of his soul for pardon and a new life.

Let us ask for the grace of a deep sense of our personal sinfulness, a lively faith in Christ as our Saviour, and a humble trust in his merciful love, a love that will take the initiative in drawing us into his friendship. His friendship is eternal life both here and hereafter.



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Scripture today: Ecclesiastes 3:1-11; Psalm 143;

Luke 9:18-22

Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, Who do the crowds say I am? They replied, Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life. But what about you? he asked. Who do you say I am? Peter answered, The Christ of God.

Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone. And he said, The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be put to death and on the third day be raised to life. (Luke 9:18-22)

Christ the Key Joseph Smith Jr. (1805-1844), born in Vermont and reared in western New York, was the American founder of the Latter Day Saint movement. Smith claimed that in the 1820s an angel directed him to a buried book of golden plates inscribed with a religious history of ancient American peoples. He published what he said was an English translation of the plates as the ***Book of Mormon***. I mention the ***Book of Mormon*** merely to indicate what some might expect of a Revelation, were a Revelation to occur at all. It might happen as a one-off event, given in a text which would be written in heaven or dictated word-for-word by heaven. The ***Koran*** is deemed to be such — self-sufficient and dictated word-for-word by heaven. But historical (Judeo-Christian) Revelation is not so simple. Beginning with the experience of Abram in Ur,

it occurred piecemeal over some eighteen or nineteen hundred years, and for close to half that time there may not have been formally canonized texts at all. The insistent testimony of key individuals, beginning with Abram and his son and grandson, then the patriarchs, then Moses (of course), certain “judges,” kings and prophets, was pivotal to the general acceptance of the Revelation by the chosen people. This Revelation was gradually recorded in a range of inspired writings of various types. Now, given this uneven and unexpected history, the question, of course, was how to *interpret* the Inspired Writings? To give but one example of the problem — there is a mass of divine prescriptions set out across the first five books of the Bible, called the Pentateuch — or the book of Moses. The early Jews called this part of the Bible the law, or Torah (law), or the book of the Law — from the very nature of its contents. It was full of the Law — prescriptions detailing the divine will. But now, how was this to be interpreted in the sense of it being prioritized? For instance, which of all these commandments was the first and the greatest? On one

celebrated occasion (Matthew 23: 36, and Luke 10:25), Christ was interrogated on this very point, and he instantly pointed to one sentence in one Book (Deuteronomy 6:5) and to another in a different Book (Leviticus 19:18) as the key to the entire Law and all the Prophets.

In fact, viewing the matter as an observer, one might say that the appearance of Jesus Christ amounted to the emergence of a great Interpretation of historical Revelation. He presented himself as the divine Interpreter of all that had been revealed, and as himself being the Interpretation and Fulfilment of it. As its Interpreter, its Interpretation and its Fulfilment, he was hotly opposed by many, especially the ruling religious clique, and in particular the Temple aristocracy. He was rejected by them in favour of *their* interpretation and summarily put to death — but his death was itself embraced by him as being central to the divine Plan, and hence to the *true* interpretation of Revelation and the Scriptures. This is one aspect of our Gospel passage today (Luke 9: 18 22). Christ is praying, and following this he asks his disciples who the

crowds were saying he was — he was one of the prophets come back to life, they told him. “*But you — who do you say that I am? he asked them. Peter said in reply, ‘The Messiah of God’.*” Now, St Matthew gives a much more complete account of this pivotal conversation (16:13-28), especially in respect to Christ’s words about building his Church. In Matthew, moreover, Simon Peter’s answer to Christ’s question has greater completeness. Simon replies (in Matthew), “*You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God*” (Matthew 16:16). It seems that Matthew saw this as an enormously important exchange, and so took greater pains over its fuller reporting — just as Luke had given greater space and a different emphasis than Matthew in his account of Christ’s infancy. Luke is content with giving the first part of Simon’s answer: “*You,*” Jesus, “*are the Christ.*” Now, what this more limited statement does for us is to stress the unique place of Jesus within the entire Jewish Revelation. He is “the Messiah” — he is the Interpretation and the Fulfilment of the Scriptures. Matthew’s account does this too, of course, but Luke

restricts himself to this. Jesus is the promised Messiah. The Scriptures are to be understood in the light of Jesus of Nazareth. As in Matthew, Christ immediately speaks of his rejection, his death and resurrection. It is a suffering, rejected and risen Messiah that the Inspired Writings had been pointing to. This is the key to historical Revelation.

Let us learn to love the corpus of the Sacred Scriptures, just as Jesus Christ loved them. He often quoted them in his teaching and in his controversies. He knew them — as we might say — “backwards.” He knew them to the depths because it was his own Holy Spirit who inspired them, that same Spirit who filled him and led him at every instant of his most holy and sublime life. The Holy Scriptures are our best resource in coming to know the Lord Jesus, and he is their grand key. He is the Interpreter, the Interpretation and the Fulfilment of the Scriptures. Ah! Christ Jesus!

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Second reflection:

Sanctification Deism was a philosophy that acknowledged the existence of a God who began the world and established its laws, and then intervenes no further. While we do not hear much now of the philosophy of Deism, I suspect it is the hidden philosophy of very many without their being aware of it. Many who would not explicitly deny the existence of God, regard him as entirely uninvolved beyond the natural laws he set in place. Now, a decisive element in a *living* belief in God is the readiness to appeal to his power. If a person believes in the power of God to the extent of appealing to it and counting on it, then we may say that person has a living belief, a conviction that God is a Reality who matters. Well, in the Christian life we are commanded by our Lord to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. We are to work on growing in the perfection of love, with him as our model. It will make all the difference to our perseverance in this endeavour if we truly believe in the power of God — his saving and sanctifying power — and readily appeal to it.

No matter how great the work of personal sanctification, God is with us and it is he, with all his power, who commands us to begin and to get to work. Entrusting ourselves to his divine power, let us say always and ever again: ‘Now I begin!’



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Scripture today: Ecclesiastes 11:9-12:8; Psalm 89:

Luke 9:43b-45

While everyone was marvelling at all that Jesus did, he said to his disciples, Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. But they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp

it, and they were afraid to ask him about it. (Luke 9: 43b-45)

Listen carefully! Our Lord at various times asked his hearers to listen, and to listen carefully. In the Gospel of St Mark (4:3), our Lord begins to teach the large crowd many things in parables “*and in his teaching he said to them: Listen! (akouete) ...*” Then at the end of his parable of the Sower going out to sow, he said to them, “*Let anyone with ears to hear listen!*” (4:9). To his disciples who asked him about the parables, he explains that all comes in parables “*in order that they may ... listen but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven*” (4:12). This means, obviously, that the crowds do not listen in order to understand, so as to repent and be forgiven. So our Lord speaks obliquely to them because of the *way* they listen to him. In his explanation that follows, there are various categories of persons who “hear” the Word, and it is because of the *way* they hear that nothing comes of it. Finally there are those who “*hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a*

hundredfold” (4:14-20). It is imperative that one hear the Word with the willingness to accept it. Our Lord immediately goes on to speak of placing the lamp upon the lampstand — obviously, this is the Word being made the light of life by accepting and obeying it. “*Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!*,” our Lord says, “*Pay attention to what you hear... for to those who have, more will be given..*” (Mark 4:21-25). Our Lord proceeds to tell the parable of the mustard seed, and Mark concludes: “*With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it*” (4:33). The issue was their ability to “hear” the Word, and this had always been the crux of the matter. The prophet Jeremiah was directed by the Lord to proclaim, “*Pay attention to this, foolish and senseless people who have eyes and see not, who have ears and hear not*” (Jeremiah 5:21). Later again the same prophet states, “*Though you refused to listen or pay heed, the Lord has sent you without fail all his servants the prophets*” (25:4). In Matthew 13:14, our Lord quotes the word of God to the prophet Isaiah 6:10, that the people will listen but not

understand. Their ears will be dull. The question of *how* we hear is a fundamental issue in the work of our salvation.

So it is that in our Gospel text today (Luke 9: 43b-45), our Lord tells his disciples to let his words sink into them: he wants them to listen with the utmost care and take his words to heart. They must listen! Peter, James and John had seen him transfigured in glory (Luke 9: 28-36) on the mountain. On the next day he drove out a demon from a child, and “*all were astounded at the greatness of God.*” Everyone “*was amazed at all that he was doing*” (9:43). It is precisely then, amid the euphoria of general acclaim, when his disciples could be carried away by the heady thought of popular approval and success, that our Lord told them to *listen carefully* to what he was saying. He, the Son of Man, was going to be betrayed and done away with. Significantly, they did not understand his plain language. Direct as it was, its meaning was concealed from them, so they could not perceive it. These statements of Holy Scripture about our Lord’s own disciples show that understanding, and in particular religious understanding, is

not just a matter of hearing with the ears and having the intellectual ability to grasp the meaning of words. However plainly put, some things will not be understood if they are not listened to in a certain way. *How* we listen will determine if we “hear” what is being said. In turn, *how* we listen will be determined by our inner state. If our inner state is of a certain character, the meaning of what we hear will be hidden, concealed, from us. Despite our Lord’s repeated explanation to his disciples that he had to suffer in order to enter his glory, and that he would indeed suffer grievously, be put to death, and would rise on the third day, it seems to have made little impression at that point on his disciples. Our Gospel text today tells us also that they “*were afraid to ask him about what he had said*” (Luke 9:45). It was a mystery to them, despite its clarity. The state of a man’s heart and soul will govern what he will understand and how he will judge — in a word, “how” he will “hear.” As our Lord says a little earlier: “*Look, then, to how you hear!*” (Luke 8:18). We must hear the

Word with a certain attitude: the desire to accept it, and to put it into practice.

It may surely be said that the revelation of Jesus Christ brought with it an important message for the philosophy of human knowledge. You will never “know” certain things unless your heart is right. Such things are inaccessible to mere physical hearing and mere intellectual reflection, if behind such acts of apprehension there is a certain state of heart. A state of heart that is undesirous of what God wants will not properly “hear” what he says. We must take great care “how” we hear, and we must “hear” with moral diligence. In a word, we must “hear” with a species of love. Let us pray for the grace so to hear, then!

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Second reflection: (Luke 9:43-45)

“At a time when everyone was full of admiration ... Jesus said to his disciples: ... The Son of Man is going to be handed over into the power of men.”

It is natural to find joy in one's work, and when the work is well done it is natural to be complimented for it. In our Lord's case, we are told that during his public ministry people said that *he had done all things well*. It must be presumed that throughout his life he did all things well, including during the long period of his hidden years at Nazareth. It is obvious that during his years at Nazareth, our Lord blended in normally and, indeed, exceptionally well within his wider family and within the community at Nazareth — which itself was also an instance of our Lord doing all things well. For this he would have been admired as an excellent human being. So then, in our Gospel passage our Lord is being admired: “*everyone was full of admiration for all he did.*” But precisely then our Lord reminds his disciples that an ignominious end was coming

upon him. As his closest associates they, perhaps, were being carried away by all the adulation coming to their master. Our Lord reminds them of what he would refer to repeatedly: that the Son of Man would have to suffer in order to enter into his glory. If our Lord chose to remind them of the cross during the good times of his work and ministry, we too ought allow him to remind us of the cross during our good times.

That is to say, as his disciples we ought keep the Cross ever before us, knowing that it is when the Cross comes that there is the best opportunity to be at one with the Master in his saving work. Our Lord was increasingly insistent on this point as the culminating moment of his life approached. The culminating moment was not the moment of admiration from the people, but the moment of rejection and suffering. Let us pray for the grace to be able to keep the Cross of Christ at the forefront of our life.



Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time A-2

Entrance Antiphon Daniel 3:31, 29, 30, 43, 42 All that you have done to us, O Lord, you have done with true judgment, for we have sinned against you and not obeyed your commandments. But give glory to your name and deal with us according to the bounty of your mercy.

Collect O God, who manifest your almighty power above all by pardoning and showing mercy, bestow, we pray, your grace abundantly upon us and make those hastening to attain your promises heirs to the treasures of heaven. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezekiel 18:25-28; Psalm 25:4-5, 8, 9, 10, 14; Philippians 2:1-11; Matthew 21:28-32.

Jesus said to the chief priests and the elders: “What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the

vineyard.’ “ ‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. “Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go. “Which of the two did what his father wanted?” “The first,” they answered. Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him. (Matthew 21:28-32)

On merit Perhaps the first thing we think of, when thinking of God, is his great *power*. In the Creed we state that we believe in God the Father *Almighty*. He is almighty, yet he has called us to collaborate with him by working on what he has created. A couple marry and bring children into the world — they collaborate in this with the creative action of God. They work at their tasks and improve society and the world — and in this too they collaborate with the sustaining work of the Creator. The

result is that while everything comes from the creative hand of God, at the same time by our work we gain the merit of improving the world. Yet we can do this only by the power, the creative and sustaining power, of God. Something parallel to this happens in the work of our salvation and sanctification. Only God saves. He alone can sanctify. Yet we have been given the freedom to work with God for our salvation and sanctification, and we can do this only by his power. This means that while there is no strict right to any merit on the part of man, God has freely chosen to associate man with the work of his grace. We attain holiness and heaven only by the grace of God, but then man's calling is to freely collaborate with God's initiative and grace. It is in this sense that we *merit* a place in heaven: it is a reward for our having chosen to live according to his will. God truly rewards us for our fidelity. Yet this fidelity and exercise of choice is done *in Christ*, and depends on the power and the grace of God. As St Augustine writes, "our merits are God's gifts" (Sermon 298, 4-5). In the early Church there was a monk by the

name of Pelagius (a contemporary of Augustine) who taught that it is those who put personal effort into the work of salvation and sanctification who are saved and sanctified. But Pelagius *also* said that this personal effort, and not the grace of God, was all that was needed. St Augustine devoted himself to combatting this error. The Church teaches that no one can merit the initial grace of forgiveness and justification. That having been granted, even then we must generously collaborate with divine grace.

On the basis of the gift of grace, which is to say moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification. That is to say, the Church teaches both the necessity of grace and the necessity of our own efforts. Our Gospel today (Matthew 21: 28 32) invites us to bear in mind our own part in all that God wills for us, which is our sanctification. When the Church teaches that by our efforts we can “merit,” she is insisting on nothing other than our own active and free collaboration. We merit the reward of

eternal life in heaven by choosing to be perseveringly faithful. It is God's work, but it is our work too, and our work is sustained by the power of God. In today's Gospel (Matthew 21: 28-32), our Lord tells the story of a man and his two sons. The man asked the first to go and work in his vineyard. The son refused, but then repented and went to work in his father's vineyard. The other son was asked to do the same. This second son replied that he would, but then did not go at all. Our Lord is saying that what we actually choose to do is of critical importance, though of course for this we depend totally on his gift of grace. Our place in heaven and the eternal reward we finally "merit" will depend on our being like the son who actually chose to do what the father wanted. He repented and did his father's will. The important thing is the doing. All indeed depends on the help and grace of God, but without our cooperation — by the doing of God's will — the grace of God will not bear fruit because God made us free. However much grace may be given to us, still, it is for us to choose or not to choose to do what God asks. All will

depend on what, with God's grace and only by means of God's grace, we actually choose to do. In this sense, our salvation and sanctification depend on us. We "merit" our eternal reward — and it will therefore be a true reward, though this will be itself the gift of God. We ought be constantly praying for the grace of God to enable us to do his will, and then resolutely deciding to do it. We have the responsibility to make the choice.

A person may be unforgiving for years. In his heart of hearts he does nothing about this. He prays, but he does not actually make the effort and take the leap of forgiving, because he secretly does not want to. The critical point here is that his own free action in the matter is lacking. Perhaps he expects God to change him by his grace and forgets that he must choose to change — as did the son in the Gospel who said he would not, but did. This applies to the immensely important work of putting on the virtues of the heart, so that we acquire the mind of Christ by his grace, of course. Let our Gospel today remind us that we are called not only to acknowledge God's grace, but to act

according to it. We are meant (by the grace of God) to “merit” our reward.

Further Reading: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*
no.2006-2011 (Merit)



Monday of the twenty-sixth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Daniel 3:31, 29, 30, 43, 42 All that you have done to us, O Lord, you have done with true judgment, for we have sinned against you and not obeyed your commandments. But give glory to your name and deal with us according to the bounty of your mercy.

Collect O God, who manifest your almighty power above all by pardoning and showing mercy, bestow, we pray, your grace abundantly upon us and make those hastening to attain your promises heirs to the treasures of heaven. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Job 1:6-22; Psalm 16; Luke 9:46-50

An argument started among the disciples of Jesus as to which of them would be the greatest. Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and made him stand beside him. Then he said to them, Whoever welcomes this

little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all- he is the greatest. Master, said John, we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us. Do not stop him, Jesus said, for whoever is not against you is for you. (Luke 9:46-50)

Being great When Philip, the father of Alexander the Great, ascended to the Macedonian throne, the country was virtually at the brink of collapse and its neighbours were ready to put an end to its existence. The Macedonian state was further weakened by internal turmoil. With consummate intelligence, Philip took the state in hand and in 358 BC he met the Illyrians in battle with his reorganized Macedonian phalanx, and utterly defeated them. The Macedonian army grew in size overnight and invaded Illyria itself, conquering all Illyrian tribes deep into the country, stopping short near the Adriatic coast. Philip made the military a way of life for the Macedonian men. It became a professional occupation that paid well

enough that the soldiers could afford to do it year round. Then began a stunning series of military victories and diplomatic steps that brought him to the pinnacle of Greek power and the threshold of his intended invasion of Persia — but then, of course, he was assassinated and the baton passed to his illustrious son. But what was the purpose of all this? It was the same as that of dynasty after dynasty in the history of the world — it was to found, establish and extend a kingdom. It was to be a kingdom of this world, and Alexander would take the Macedonian kingdom to its limits. Behind this inveterate quest for a kingdom was a lunging, craving pride and insatiable thirst for temporal glory. As the first book of Maccabees says of Alexander, *“He advanced to the ends of the earth, gathering plunder from many nations; the earth fell silent before him, and his heart became proud and arrogant”* — and then he died (1 Maccabees 1:3-5). The whole point was to reach the top and to receive a species of worship. The Roman Empire that eventually followed Alexander’s ruthless adventures was also all about gaining a dominion. It is well described

by Satan when he attempted to entice Christ to seek a similar world-wide kingdom: he showed him “*all the kingdoms of the world in a single instant. He said to him, ‘I will give you all this power and the glory of these kingdoms ... prostrate yourself in homage before me, and it shall all be yours’*” (Luke 4:5-7). Christ sent Satan packing.

This is the context in which we ought understand our Gospel passage today. Our Lord’s disciples knew that God’s kingdom was being announced by the One who would be its King. It would be the greatest of kingdoms and no earthly power could possibly prevail over it. It would conquer, and it would have the victory. The Twelve loved Christ and had, with the tragic exception of Judas Iscariot, given their hearts to him. They would be his generals, the patriarchs of the new people, the foundation stones of the new grand edifice. But they had profound misconceptions of the reality ahead of them — their model was that of the temporal kingdom. Even after he had risen from the dead, as Luke (the author of our Gospel passage)

describes in the Acts of the Apostles, the disciples envisioned the “Kingdom” as a political restoration and advance of the “kingship” to the children of Israel (Acts 1:6). So it is that in our passage today we find them thinking of what all who sought kingdoms and kingship sought: position, status, glory, power. We read that “*An argument started among the disciples of Jesus as to which of them would be the greatest*” (Luke 9: 46). It was precisely this which constituted Satan’s temptation of Jesus Christ, and it was precisely this which Satan had sought in the beginning. He had sought the place of God, the greatest. His first intervention at the dawn of history was in this very direction. He tempted the Woman to be like a god, able to “know” — i.e., decide on for herself — good and evil. The Woman chose to be like a god, and turned to the Man who chose the same. They wanted to be the greatest. It is the grand temptation of free creatures. Why am I not God? Why cannot I be God, or a god like God, able to decide for myself what is good and what is evil, what should or should not be done, what is true and what is

false, what is real and what is not real? I shall be the greatest! Christ was the New Man, and he chose the opposite: *“Then he said to them, Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all- he is the greatest”* (Luke 9: 46-50).

All through history the kingdoms of this world and their kings advance and conquer by pride, position, power and glory. The result is that they become the greatest — but only for a very limited time, and only in a very limited sense. Such are the kingdoms of this world. But, as Christ said to Pilate the representative of one of the greatest kingdoms in human history, his kingdom was not *of* this world, though (in him) it was *in* this world. The path to victory of his kingdom was by being the “least.” It would come by means of humble obedience to God, by meekness, holiness and unswerving adherence to the good. Let us set out on the path to victory, then — by following in the footsteps of the Crucified One.

Second reflection:

Faith So much of what God asks of us appears to be beyond our powers — and, indeed, is beyond our powers. God asks of us that we dedicate ourselves to the work he has given us in life and to try to be successful in it. He asks that in the midst of our everyday work we endeavour to bring the souls of those around us closer to him and to his friendship. He asks that we seek and attain sanctity. These are difficult goals and were it to depend on our own powers alone it would be, of course, impossible. The danger is that we may give up through lack of faith in the power and the presence of God. We must keep before us the plan of God for us. St Paul tells us very plainly: *“This is the will of God: your sanctification.”* If it is God’s plan to bring us to holiness, we must constantly believe that it is possible, and act accordingly. If we find our thoughts, words and deeds to be at variance with this plan,

then we ought then and there repent and start again,
trusting not in ourselves but in his saving will and power.

It is this faith in God which will give us the hope and
the love enabling us to open ourselves constantly to his
grace, always beginning again. So, now I begin!



Tuesday of the twenty-sixth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Daniel 3:31, 29, 30, 43, 42 All that you have done to us, O Lord, you have done with true judgment, for we have sinned against you and not obeyed your commandments. But give glory to your name and deal with us according to the bounty of your mercy.

Collect O God, who manifest your almighty power above all by pardoning and showing mercy, bestow, we pray, your grace abundantly upon us and make those hastening to attain your promises heirs to the treasures of heaven. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Job 3:1-3.11-17.20-23; Psalm 87;

Luke 9:51-56

As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to

get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” But Jesus turned and rebuked them. Then he and his disciples went to another village. (Luke 9: 51-56)

Summit of all As a person looks back on the decades of his life, he may well see a seemingly insignificant event as having been the most important event of his life. A girl is in her late teens — she has grown up on a remote farm and happens to be holidaying briefly in the metropolis which is a day’s difficult journey from her home. She is in the home of acquaintances and a relative of theirs visits, and they meet. He takes her out to a dance, and gradually they become acquainted. Seventy years later she is drawing near the end of her long life and she looks back on that meeting. They were married, raised a large family with all its ups and downs. He has been dead many years, and she is now a profoundly religious old lady. Her

life turned on that seemingly insignificant meeting so long before. It is the same with human history as a whole — it is studded with what at the time did not seem to be especially important events. But it turned out that they were extremely important for what they led to. A prime minister is having a brief break from his pressing national work and makes a decision to go for a swim at the beach. He is a good swimmer, and loves swimming. Out he goes, and he is drowned, with his body never found. That spur-of-the-moment and fatal decision also leads to the gradual fall of his government. Or again, the tiniest mishap can lead to world-wide consequences. In late June, 1914, Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria was officially visiting Sarajevo. A first assassination attempt had been unsuccessful. Later Franz Ferdinand's open car had to reverse, having taken the wrong turn as it drove past, near the Latin Bridge. After realizing the mistake, the driver put his foot on the brake, and began to back up. In doing so the engine of the car stalled and the gears locked, giving Gavilro Princip, Franz Ferdinand's about-to-be assassin,

his opportunity. Princip stepped forward, pistol whipped a nearby pedestrian, and fired two shots from a distance of about five feet using a semi-automatic pistol. The Archduke was killed, and Europe was plunged into the worst world war that had ever been seen to that point. That mistake by the Archduke's driver of putting his foot on the brake led to a great change in world history. Seemingly insignificant events can be momentous.

To say the least, one's realization of this fact ought lead to the resolve to do everything, even the tiniest things, in the presence of God and according to his good pleasure. The tiniest duties are important, and while we cannot direct history, we can at least do what we do in accord with what seems to be the will of God. God, the Lord of history, can then be asked to look after the rest. How different would history be if all, including the ordinary unknown individual, resolved to do God's will in the little things! If Gavilro Princip had but served God in the little things on that fateful day, all would have been different in June and July of 1914. But my point here is not precisely this — it

is rather that what seems to be small and insignificant can be full of moment and importance. It is this which brings us to our Gospel today (Luke 9: 51-56), as we picture our Lord resolutely setting out for Jerusalem. His disciples did not understand it — what they did sense was the danger. Our Lord had set his face towards Jerusalem. He knew it was there that he would accomplish his passing from this world to his heavenly Father. No-one, except for his own most holy Mother who was out of sight, knew the momentous stakes that were involved in these simple steps he was taking. It was the redemption of the whole world that was about to be effected. The sin of the world was about to be taken away by the Lamb of God who would be sacrificed. Let our attention turn from the great Work to the One who was to do it. All-powerful, he was humble and meek. On his way to Jerusalem, so fateful and so full of unending promise, he encountered the pettiness of the human heart. The Samaritans would not receive him simply because he was on his way to Jerusalem — their religious antagonist in belief and worship. Full of

indignation on behalf of their wonderful Master, James and John sprang to their proposal: Lord, let us call down fire from heaven on these wilful and wicked dolts! Perhaps they thought of Sodom and Gomorrah. The response of Christ's heart was to reprove his ardent disciples: the way you speak is not the divine way! His almighty power, saving the world, would be manifest in apparent weakness. As we place ourselves in our Gospel scene today, let us appreciate yet again that what was about to happen was the most important thing in the entire history of the universe. All other events are satellites and appendages, relatively speaking, of this grand and immeasurably momentous event. Christ was going up to Jerusalem, and his face was resolutely set in that direction, and there the great Deed would be done. As mankind's Priest, he would offer himself up as a Victim for the sin of the world. The Atonement would be effected, and man would be, in principle, set free. He, the holy One of God, would do it. Let us ask for the grace to follow in his footsteps, then!

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Second reflection: (Luke 9: 51-56)

“But he turned and rebuked them, and they went off to another village.” Our Lord once said to his disciples that the great men of this world make their authority felt, and that this was not to happen among them. History shows that the great men of this world impose themselves on others and get their way. They are concerned for their own precedence. How different from this was the way that our Lord trod. He was not only a man, a great man, but in the first place, he was and is God. He was a divine Person. Yet throughout the Gospels we see him refraining from using his divine power for his own advantage, and instead following the path of humility, meekness, courtesy. Our Lord was, let us say it without disrespect, the supreme Gentleman. In our Gospel passage today, our Lord is on his way to Jerusalem (and to his death) and *“because he was making for Jerusalem”, the “people would not receive him.”* Our Lord’s disciples, James and John, reacted in the way so many Christians have reacted in the face of things done that are wrong and

disrespectful of God. They wanted the perpetrators severely punished. But our Lord was humble, meek and respectful. In matters that related to his own interest and convenience he was entirely accommodating. Instead, he and his disciples “*went off to another village.*”

Let us then resolve to be like Christ in the many situations of life that involve a personal affront. Let us not initiate a duel over it, rather let us be Christ-like gentlemen.



Wednesday of the twenty-sixth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Daniel 3: 31, 29, 30, 43, 42 All that you have done to us, O Lord, you have done with true judgment, for we have sinned against you and not obeyed your commandments. But give glory to your name and deal with us according to the bounty of your mercy.

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Scripture today: Nehemiah 2: 1-8; Psalm 137:1-6;

Luke 9:57-62

As they were walking along the road, a man said to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of

Man has no place to lay his head.” He said to another man, “Follow me.” But he replied, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Still another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family.” Jesus replied, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:57-62)

Following the Lord In the 2011 on-line blog entitled “Philosophy Now,” Joel Marks gave us a “moral manifesto” (written in 2010). Joel Marks was Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of New Haven in West Haven, Connecticut. He wrote that for “the last couple of years I have been reflecting on and experimenting with a new ethics, and as a result I have thrown over my previous commitment to Kantianism. In fact, I have given up morality altogether!” I give this as an example of how, broadly speaking, Kant’s “Categorical Imperative” is taken by many to be the one philosophy that

justifies Duty and our treating other people as ends in themselves, and not merely as means to achieving our own ends. In his blog, Marks said that he is an atheist of the “hard atheism” variety, and that atheism implies amorality. Without God, he avows, there is no morality. “In sum,” he continued, “while theists take the obvious existence of moral commands to be a kind of proof of the existence of a Commander, i.e., God, I now take the non-existence of a Commander as a kind of proof that there are no Commands, i.e., morality.” Morality had been “the essence” of Marks’s “existence, both personally and professionally.” Now, he says, it is no more. The new basis of his actions and his life is *desire*. For whatever reason or reasons, or even no reason, various things matter to him — and his motivation to act is the *relevant desire*. Preference, then, is the ultimate determinate of action. We human beings can discover plenty of internal resources for motivating certain *preferences*. Such horrors as the molesting of children will continue to be horrors precisely because of the principle of *preference*, and this will ensure

that such things are prohibited and punishable by society. Well now, what are we to think of this? Such a line of thought is ridiculous and, to say the least, flies in the face of the hard fact of objective moral obligation and the Natural Law, which common sense and the life of society accepts. I refer to the philosophical curiosity that is Joel Marks, merely to introduce the great reality of *Duty*. Duty should be the objective determinant and anchor of human action, and the antidote to the vagaries and blindness of mere preference.

Let us not pursue here the foundations of morality — despite Marks, we can take as settled that there is an objective obligation to be moral and to observe various specific moral obligations, even were there no social sanctions to enforce them. But even if we grant the reality of duty and the objective requirement of a moral life, what, we might ask, will be its *ultimate* motivation? Is it, for instance, mere self-respect? Is it from respect for my very self that I continue to refuse to engage in what my conscience tells me to be an immoral course? Or is it out of

respect for the other whom I regard as of equal importance to me? This brings us to our Gospel passage today (Luke 9: 57-62), in which our Lord requires an absolute personal devotion to himself, leading us to do whatever he commands and to follow him wherever he goes. *“As they were walking along the road, a man said to Jesus, ‘I will follow you wherever you go.’ Jesus replied, ‘Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.’ He said to another man, ‘Follow me.’ But he replied, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.’”* I myself doubt that there is an enduring prospect for one who wishes to lead a good and moral life, a life that will proceed progressively to great goodness, if all he has before him is the moral obligation itself. If all he has is his sense of objective duty, I doubt his prospects of being highly moral. He will need a Love in his life, a Love that itself is insistent on morality and goodness. We are made for love and we are made for duty, and the two must be

found in synthesis. That synthesis is present in the revelation of a holy God who commands that we love him and that we be holy. *Be holy*, God says, *for I am holy* (Leviticus 20:26, and 1 Peter 1:16). Now, as St Paul writes, in Jesus Christ there dwells *the fullness of the Godhead bodily* (Colossians 2:9). In following and loving him we are following and loving the Lord God himself, and he absolutely requires a moral life, indeed a highly moral life. The slightest deliberate sin requires repentance.

In our Gospel today, Jesus Christ expects the highest personal devotion to him. This is the motivation for the living of a high moral life, and the saints demonstrate this. In his *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk* (1875), Newman referred to the Conscience as the “*aboriginal vicar of Christ, a prophet in its informations, a monarch in its peremptoriness, a priest in its blessings and anathemas*”. In the plan of God, Jesus Christ is the true love of the heart of man, and it is he who is the foundation of the commitment to live the moral life. Let us, then, follow wherever he may go, and do whatever he may command.

Second reflection: (Nehemiah 2:1-8)

“This the king granted me, for the kindly favour of my God was with me.”

I remember years ago attending a lunch-time seminar at Sydney University. A priest who was a member of the Philosophy department of the Faculty of Arts was giving a paper on prayer. He was defending the proposition that prayers can be known to have been answered. In his audience were two professors of Philosophy, both of whom were at least agnostics, possibly atheists. The priest's paper aroused much discussion. The topic being discussed was no mere academic question but a very existential one. Many people begin with prayer for something they want and need, but give up because, they think, they see no results. In our first reading from the Old Testament book of Nehemiah, Nehemiah is asked by the King, “*What is your request?*” Nehemiah tells us that “*I called on the God of heaven and*

made this reply to the King.” The King granted his request and at the end of the passage Nehemiah gives the reason for his success: it is that “*the kindly favour of my God was with me.*” The passage is very much about God answering prayer. Towards the end of his life Cardinal Newman, speaking on the matter of God answering our prayers, suggested that God seems to answer our prayers mainly *by extension*. By this he meant that God seems generally to stretch and extend, at critical points, the natural forces that are at work so as to grant the object of our prayers. In this way he respects as much as possible the natural laws of the world that he himself has instituted and sustained. If this is the case I suppose it accounts for the fact that often we do not realize that God has answered our prayers till after the event — it has come silently and unobserved. Newman went on to suggest that we ought pray for what appears to us as the likely will of God.

God’s will is full of surprises. It is merciful, abundantly generous, flexible and reflective of his power. God wants us to ask for all that we need and to have

confidence in his power. What would have happened to the wedding feast at Cana had not Mary asked her Son to do something? So let us pray and petition with confidence and faith, but at the same time trying to know and be submissive to the God who wishes to hear the prayers of his children.



Thursday of the twenty-sixth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Daniel 3:31, 29, 30, 43, 42 All that you have done to us, O Lord, you have done with true judgment, for we have sinned against you and not obeyed your commandments. But give glory to your name and deal with us according to the bounty of your mercy.

Collect O God, who manifest your almighty power above all by pardoning and showing mercy, bestow, we pray, your grace abundantly upon us and make those hastening to attain your promises heirs to the treasures of heaven. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Job 19:21-27; Psalm 26; Luke 10:1-12

After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. He told them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord

of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road. “When you enter a house, first say, ‘Peace to this house.’ If the head of the house loves peace, your peace will rest on that house; if not, it will return to you. Stay there, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for workers deserve their wages. Do not move around from house to house. “When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is set before you. Heal the sick who are there and tell them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’ But when you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town we wipe from our feet as a warning to you. Yet be sure of this: The kingdom of God has come near.’ I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town. (Luke 10:1-12)

Christ’s mission The fifth century AD was a century of high drama, a time of disaster and instability for the Western Roman Empire, which finally came to an end

in AD 476. The eastern Roman Empire, with its capital at Constantinople, was to last for another millennium before succumbing to the Islamic forces. What had happened in the West? The Western Empire had been ruled by a succession of weak emperors, and true power began to fall increasingly into the hands of powerful generals. Instability and military problems caused by foreign invaders resulted in the sacking of Rome by a Visigoth army in 410. Some recovery was made in the following decades, but the Western Empire received a serious blow when another barbarian group, the Vandals, occupied Carthage, capital of the important province of Africa, a major supplier of wealth and grain. As well as this there were the invasions of the Huns under Attila. A shining star of the period was Pope Leo the Great who, in a delegation to him, confronted Attila and convinced him not to attack Rome. After Attila's final defeat and death, both Eastern and Western empires joined for an assault on Vandal North Africa, but their campaign was a failure. It was a tense and turbulent century, beginning what are usually called the

Dark Ages. But what do we see occurring at this juncture? The so-called Dark Ages proved to be the age of the evangelization of the barbarian invaders by the Church, and the Church's resulting construction of Christian Europe. It was a kind of repeat of what had happened following the crucifixion of Jesus Christ — the Church then endured three centuries of difficulty and persecution, but because of its missionary witness, triumphed. During the fifth century this result was undone as the Western Empire began to crumble under pressure from the invading barbarians, of which Attila was a striking instance. The point, though, is that there was a profound impulse in the life of the Church, ever appearing under the adverse circumstances. It was the *missionary* spirit. The unseen risen Jesus, head of his beleaguered body the Church, was ever sending out his disciples “*two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go*”, as it were.

Take one instance, coming forth out of the cauldron of the fifth century. I refer to the remarkable missionary

bishop St Patrick. Born in Roman Britain (perhaps in Cumbria), he was captured and carried off as a slave to Ireland when he was about sixteen. There he worked as a herdsman and captive for about six years. It was a time of spiritual growth, for his faith grew and he prayed daily. Now in his early twenties, he fled and returned to his family. He recounts that in due course he had a vision: “I saw a man coming, as it were from Ireland. His name was Victoricus, and he carried many letters, and he gave me one of them. I read the heading: *The Voice of the Irish*. As I began the letter, I imagined in that moment that I heard the voice of those very people who were near the wood of Foclut, which is beside the western sea — and they cried out, as with one voice: ‘We appeal to you, holy servant boy, to come and walk among us’.” It seems that Patrick placed himself under the authority and guidance of St. Germain, and a few years later it was at that great bishop’s hands that Ireland’s future apostle was raised to the priesthood. The writer of St. Germain’s *Life* in the ninth century, Heric of Auxerre, attests that: “Since the glory of

the father shines in the training of the children, of the many sons in Christ whom St. Germain is believed to have had as disciples in religion, let it suffice to make mention here, very briefly, of one most famous, Patrick, the special Apostle of the Irish nation, as the record of his work proves. Subject to that most holy discipleship for 18 years, he drank in no little knowledge in Holy Scripture from the stream of so great a well-spring. Germain sent him, accompanied by Segetius, his priest, to Celestine, Pope of Rome, approved of by whose judgement, supported by whose authority, and strengthened by whose blessing, he went on his way to Ireland.” Patrick’s success in pagan Ireland was remarkable for its power and the missionary impulse to which it gave birth, both then and in later centuries. The point is this: amid the worst conditions, the Church was and is *on mission*.

Two things mark the authentic Christian: firstly, a deep realization of the Truth of Jesus Christ and how he is the divine Blessing for mankind, and secondly a heart marked by love, the love of Christ. This possession of the

Truth of Jesus and a spirit of authentic love results in the missionary spirit — and this ought be present in the most ordinary of Christians. All of this we are reminded of in today's Gospel (Luke 10: 1-12), in which our Lord sends his seventy-two disciples out in pairs to announce the Kingdom. That Kingdom is present in Jesus Christ. Let us take our part with Jesus Christ in his mission.



Friday of the twenty-sixth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Daniel 3:31, 29, 30, 43, 42 All that you have done to us, O Lord, you have done with true judgment, for we have sinned against you and not obeyed your commandments. But give glory to your name and deal with us according to the bounty of your mercy.

Collect O God, who manifest your almighty power above all by pardoning and showing mercy, bestow, we pray, your grace abundantly upon us and make those hastening to attain your promises heirs to the treasures of heaven. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Job 38:1.12-21;40:3-5; Psalm 138;

Luke 10:13-16

Jesus said to them, “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty deeds done in your midst had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would long ago

have repented, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment than for you. And as for you, Capernaum, 'Will you be exalted to heaven? You will go down to the netherworld.' Whoever listens to you listens to me. Whoever rejects you rejects me. And whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me."
(Luke 10:13-16)

Faith One of the great shifts that gradually occurred between the century of the Protestant Reformation and the twentieth century was, on the one hand, a break between religious faith and morality, and on the other, the exaltation of morality and the demotion of religious faith. In the Christian religion, the triune God is the fount of morality. Life in Jesus Christ is the living source of the moral life. The Ten Commandments of the Book of Exodus is a paradigm of this profound relationship between religion and morality: the first three of the Commandments govern our relationships with the one God, and this is the basis of the next seven Commandments which concern the general moral life and our relationships

with our fellow-man. Our Lord himself said, *if you love me you will keep my commandments*, and, *love one another as I have loved you*. Love for Christ leads to a moral life, and it provides in Jesus the exemplar of it. Our religion, understood as our love for God, is the foundation and heart of our moral life. With the eruption of the Reformation, overtaken then by the Enlightenment, two things emerged. Firstly, “Reason” was seen as the light of the individual and society, supplanting Revelation as the ground of religion. Christian dogmas were subject to the sanction and approval of “Reason” and were, accordingly, largely rejected as not being “rational.” The God of a reasonable religion was seen to be the deist god. Secondly, morality became more important than religion anyway, and it was a morality the ground of which was, likewise, “Reason.” Religion, and in particular faith in revealed religion, was dispensable while a morality founded on reason remained necessary for the human life. Of course, all this has led to the modern philosophical questioning of any objective morality — but that is a further story. What I am pointing

to here is the modern assumption, emerging over the last few centuries, that religious faith is peripheral in importance to the human life and its prospects. Provided you are a good and moral person (however this is conceived), your particular religious faith is an entirely secondary and optional matter.

But this really is an assumption, and the stakes are high. Now, an observer of the general sweep of human history and its philosophical and religious thought would have to regard Jesus Christ as very important indeed. Well, what has he to say of this? He said that religious faith, and in particular faith in himself, is of immense importance. To say the very least, therefore, it ought not be assumed that it is unimportant simply because it is the modern way of looking at things. All of this brings us to our Gospel passage today (Luke 10:13-16), in which our Lord speaks of the towns which were ignoring his message and disregarding the call and duty to believe in him. There is, incidentally, something important to be remembered when we speak of the call to believe in Jesus Christ. It is that

there is no personality in the whole of the Scriptures who called for devotion to and faith in himself in the way Jesus Christ did. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and his brothers the patriarchs, Moses, Samuel and the Judges, David and the great Prophets after him — none of these outstanding personalities and witnesses to divine revelation required of the people of God a religious faith in themselves that compared with the faith in himself that Jesus Christ requested and required. It is one of the many unique features of the Person and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth — and of course it flowed from his claim to be the divine Son of the Father almighty. He taught that life everlasting depended on our faith in him — it being understood, of course, that this “faith” was a living faith showing forth a life of obedience to his commands. It led to and required a highly moral life. Just before he ascended into heaven he commanded his disciples to go to the whole world, not to teach the nations to be moral, but to make of them *his disciples*. However, this meant teaching them *to observe all he had commanded*. So it was that discipleship

involved the moral life. But faith was the foundation, and the whole world was called to this faith. It is critical that man believe, that he have faith in Christ. In our Gospel today we see this point uttered by Christ in dramatic terms. *“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty deeds done in your midst had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would long ago have repented, sitting in sackcloth and ashes.”* They did not believe in him.

The fundamental work of the life of man is to believe in God, which means belief in Jesus Christ. God has sent his Son to reveal and to effect his plan for man and his salvation. Our benefiting from what God has done in his Son our Redeemer hinges on our faith in him. This is the foundation of everything. It is of critical importance that the world and every man come to believe in Jesus Christ and then live each day according to that religious belief. It is a belief that is dogmatic, objective, creedal. Let us ask for the gift of faith then, and live by it.

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Second reflection:

Sense of sin Pope Pius XII many years ago made a judgment on the modern era which has been repeated by the Church on different occasions since. He said that the sin of the modern world is the loss of the sense of sin. That is to say, the sense of personal sinfulness and of the evil of sinning has been largely lost — we do not have the sense that we are sinners, and the sins we commit do not seem to us to be very wrong at all. He said, furthermore, that this loss of the sense of sin is itself sinful — it is not just a chance fact, a mere happening, a neutral curiosity of human culture. For both reasons a great change of heart is needed. God sent his Son to save the world precisely from sin, and if we have little realization of sin we shall feel little need for our Saviour Jesus Christ. It is essential that we recognise our sinfulness, if we are ever to repent of it and be saved and sanctified. Our Lord on one occasion when hearing of the accidental death of several persons said that, while their death did not mean that they were greater sinners than others in Jerusalem, unless people

(who told him of the event) repented they too would perish. *The wages of sin*, St Paul writes in Romans, *are death*, and Christ came to save us from the death brought by sin.

Let us begin by praying for a genuine sense of sin. This will enable us to confess our sins both from the heart and in the Sacrament of Penance, and to amend. This amendment must be ongoing all through life. What a grace to die truly penitent!



Saturday of the twenty-sixth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Daniel 3:31, 29, 30, 43, 42 All that you have done to us, O Lord, you have done with true judgment, for we have sinned against you and not obeyed your commandments. But give glory to your name and deal with us according to the bounty of your mercy.

Collect O God, who manifest your almighty power above all by pardoning and showing mercy, bestow, we pray, your grace abundantly upon us and make those hastening to attain your promises heirs to the treasures of heaven. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Job 42:1-3.5-6.12-16; Psalm 118;

Luke 10:17-24

The seventy two returned with joy and said, “Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.” He replied, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given

you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.” At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” Then he turned to his disciples and said privately, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.” (Luke 10:17-24)

Blessed are you! The event of our Gospel passage today illustrates once again that with Jesus Christ a great Kingdom has appeared on the scene. The disciples are

being given a taste of Christ's power — and nothing can withstand it. *“Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name”* (Luke 10: 17). They are saying that “everything” and, yes, *“even the demons are subject”* to us when we invoke your name. This almighty power is being entrusted to those who will constitute the foundations of Christ's future Church — by your name, they exclaim, we are able to conquer evil, and the demons too. Christ is preaching and heralding a Kingdom, the Kingdom of God, and he is setting out to conquer hearts and minds, and the disciples are being given a taste of the ultimate victory. *“I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you.”* Of course, the disciples have no idea as yet of the real weapons which Jesus Christ will employ to establish God's Kingdom. The great weapon is the Cross of rejection, contradiction, frustration, suffering, death — borne in a spirit of profound obedience to the divine plan. These things the demons think to be their weapons, the

trump-card that is theirs in spoiling the work of God. They have brought death to the world by enticing man to sin. But God has taken the devastation of death and made it the material for his victory. The ruin to which the demons reduced the field, God has taken up and turned to victorious account. From the valley of bones he has raised the army. The disciples as yet do not know or understand this. But they are being given a taste of the power of Jesus Christ's name. *Even the demons are subject to us!* they cry. They will come to see that it is the Cross, with its suffering and death, that is now the buckler, sword and shield which will lay the demons low. How different is this Kingdom from the kingdoms of this world! The disciples do not understand this yet. But they will, with the tragic exception of Judas who perhaps clung to a hope of a worldly kingdom. The Kingdom of which they are now fledgling officers is the Promise of the Scriptures, that for which kings and prophets and holy men had longed.

Christ makes clear to his disciples here, as he does in various other parts of each of the Gospels, that he is the

key to the Scriptures. “*Then he turned to his disciples and said privately, ‘Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it’*” (Luke 10: 17-24). The sacred scrolls consisting of various genres — prayers, poetry, history, legislation, prophecy, musings — all of these Inspired Writings had a grand meaning, but what was it? That was the question, and at various points we see the religious leaders challenging Christ with the meaning they attributed to the Scriptures. Our Lord tells his disciples in our Gospel passage that the prophets and kings of the Writings longed to see what they were seeing and to hear what they were hearing. *He* is the meaning of the Scriptures. What he was *teaching*, and above all his very *Person*, was what the Scriptures were all about. Blessed, then, are your eyes and your ears! You would not compare yourselves with the prophets and kings and great ones of the Inspired Writings, but you are much more privileged than they, by the disposition of God. Further, God has chosen you, the little

ones, over those regarded as the wise and the learned: *“Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, ‘I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.’”* And what is it that has been granted to them? It is the saving knowledge of God, God the Father, Son and Spirit: *“All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”* In his great prayer at the Last Supper, Christ would indicate how fundamental this gift of the knowledge of God really is: *“This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent”* (John 17:3). It is this which his disciples have been given, and it is this which they are to bring to the world.

But of course, this means us. We are the recipients of the Blessing which is Jesus Christ, and which the kings and prophets themselves longed to see and possess. We are the

recipients of the gift which is the knowledge of the one true God and of Jesus Christ whom he has sent. We are the recipients of the eternal life which is possessed by the one who believes in him and is baptized, and who lives in accord with this belief. We are the recipients of the mission in which we see the Twelve engaged in our Gospel passage today. Let us appreciate what is ours, then!



Twenty-seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Est 4:17 Within your will, O Lord, all things are established, and there is none that can resist your will. For you have made all things, the heaven and the earth, and all that is held within the circle of heaven; you are the Lord of all.

Collect Almighty ever living God, who in the abundance of your kindness surpass the merits and the desires of those who entreat you, pour out your mercy upon us to pardon what conscience dreads and to give what prayer does not dare to ask. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 5:17; Psalm 79;
Philippians 4:6 9; Matthew 21:33-43

Jesus said: "Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he

rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. "The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said. "But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?" "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time." Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: " 'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes' "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to

a people who will produce its fruit. Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but anyone on whom it falls will be crushed.” (Matthew 21:33-43)

The Kingdom of God

Due to journalism, the world and its needs are before us continually. One aspect of the power of journalism is the sensation it can invest in news, giving the impression that rarely before have such events as those of the day had such moment. Journalism has the capacity to bring significant things to light, and it has the capacity to give to things a significance they do not have. It can serve truth, and it can distort it. It can enable sight, or it can prevent it — at the level both of the mass and the individual. The great benefit of journalism is that we are enabled to know what is happening, and to have an analysis of it by those who know it well. The analysis may be good or bad, but because of journalism it is available. I remember when Pope St Paul VI visited Australia at the end of 1970 he told the assembled journalists that they were world power number one. I say all this precisely to introduce the *world* for our consideration, and the world is

full of good things and bad. We see and hear of advances in medicine, technology and aid to those in need. We hear of wars, insurgency, bombings, tidal waves, terrorism, diseases and widespread plagues. What is the meaning of this? What, fundamentally, is going on? God has revealed to us that at the heart of the world there is a fundamental struggle between God himself and whatever in the world that is not with God — which our Lord himself called “the world” (John 15:18-19). We may go on to ask, what will be the ultimate upshot of this struggle? It is that God will reign over all. What is the key to this final success? It is the doing of God’s will. If only God were to have full sway, that his will be done, that his full sovereignty be in place, all would be well. For all evil has stemmed and does now stem from the rejection of God’s reign and authority. What is needed is that God’s kingship, his dominion, his rule come. It is especially important for the lay member of the Church to understand this, for his place is precisely the world. The lay member of Christ’s faithful has the vocation to live and work in the world and to serve it,

working day by day for its improvement. His mission is to be a light to others, bringing them the revelation that the coming of God's kingship is the answer to the world's needs.

Our Lord himself made this clear. In the Prayer that he taught us, we are directed to pray that God's kingdom will come. In our Gospel today he refers to the Kingdom of God. God is King, he is the Ruler and Lord of all. But the enormity is that so much of the world is in rebellion against him. Further, the world cannot overcome its chronic rebellion against God, because of the Fall of man who is its appointed and natural steward. A Redeemer was needed to bring the Kingdom of God, his dominion, to the world and to man. This Kingdom of God, this kingship or rule, was the great theme of the prophecies, and it was to be the Messiah who would establish it among men. He would be its anointed King. Our Lord in his preaching taught that the promised Kingdom of God had indeed come, and it had come in him. Now, let our question be, can we be more precise about the Kingdom of God? Many

may think that the Kingdom of God is simply the widespread acceptance of moral values and the advancement of a situation favourable to human dignity — in a word, a happier world. This is certainly part of it, but it is not of the essence of the Kingdom of God, which is the answer to the world's needs and the great promise of Revealed Religion. So what exactly are we referring to, when we ask that God's Kingdom, his rule and his kingship come? We are speaking here principally of our Lord himself. In Christ is found God's kingship, his rule, his fullness. *In Christ dwells the fullness of the godhead bodily*, as St Paul writes (Colossians 2:9). In him is *found every heavenly blessing* (Ephesians 1: 1-6), because he is not just man but God. The Kingdom of God is the answer to the world's needs in that the Person of Christ and the life he offers is the answer to the world's needs. When we pray that God's Kingdom will come, we are above all praying that Christ will reign in the hearts of men everywhere. The more Christ is recognized as Lord, the more his teaching and his sacraments as coming from his

Church are accepted and lived, the more will God's Kingdom come. That is why the Kingdom of God is found most of all in the Church, because Christ is the Church's head and the Church is his body, living with his life and having the mission of bringing that life of Christ who lives in her to the world.

Christ came that we might have life and have it in abundance. At its root and in its fullness, Christ himself is the Kingdom of God. This Kingdom will reach its completion in heaven and at the end of time when Christ will hand back all to his Father. Then God will be all in all. While we have life and breath, our work is to love Christ and serve him with all our hearts, bringing his Person, his revealed message and his life — as it is present in his body the Church founded on Peter the Rock — to the world around us. In this way we shall be, in Christ, worthy members of God's Kingdom, and we shall be preparing for his everlasting Kingdom in heaven.

Further Reading: *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*,
no.2816-2821 (Thy Kingdom come)



Monday of the twenty-seventh week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Est 4:17 Within your will, O Lord, all things are established, and there is none that can resist your will. For you have made all things, the heaven and the earth, and all that is held within the circle of heaven; you are the Lord of all.

Collect Almighty ever living God, who in the abundance of your kindness surpass the merits and the desires of those who entreat you, pour out your mercy upon us to pardon what conscience dreads and to give what prayer does not dare to ask. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Galatians 1:6-12; Ps. 110; Luke 10:25-37

There was a scholar of the law who stood up to test Jesus and said, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "What is written in the law? How do you read it?" He said in reply, "You shall love the

Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself.” He replied to him, “You have answered correctly; do this and you will live.” But because he wished to justify himself, he said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbour?” Jesus replied, “A man fell victim to robbers as he went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. They stripped and beat him and went off leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down that road, but when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. Likewise a Levite came to the place, and when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. But a Samaritan traveller who came upon him was moved with compassion at the sight. He approached the victim, poured oil and wine over his wounds and bandaged them. Then he lifted him up on his own animal, took him to an inn, and cared for him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper with the instruction, ‘Take care of him. If you spend more than what I have given you, I shall repay you on my way back.’ Which of these three, in your opinion,

was neighbour to the robbers' victim?" He answered, "The one who treated him with mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:25-37)

The Commandments On one occasion, St Mark informs us (Mark 12: 28-34), our Lord was asked by a scribe who had been impressed with his replies, which is the first of the commandments? There were so many commandments set forth in the Pentateuch alone, the five books of Moses. Indeed, this question of which were the more important was a major point of contestation between our Lord and his enemies. Our Lord answered instantly, quoting a single sentence from the Book of Deuteronomy 6: 4: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart. That was the "first" of all the commandments. But immediately — though not asked for it — Christ added "the second": *"You shall love your neighbour as yourself"* (Leviticus 19:18). Love of neighbour was an integral component of the Law of God. Our Lord's reply profoundly impressed the well-meaning scribe, and he was himself commended by our Lord as being not far from the

Kingdom of God (Mark 12:34). Interestingly, this praise of Christ by one of the scribes, and Christ's praise of him, is followed in Mark by the news that "*After that no one dared to ask him any questions*" (Mark 12: 34). On the occasion of our Gospel passage today (Luke 10:25-37) — a scene similar to Matthew 22:34 — a scholar of the law rises not to ask a question in good faith, but to test our Lord with a question, the answer to which he already knew. It was the question as in Mark's Gospel, but framed differently: "*Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*" In the Book of Deuteronomy 4: 1, God says, "*Hear now, O Israel, the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live...*" In Jeremiah 21:8, God directs the prophet to place before the people the alternative: "*Tell the people, This is what the LORD says: See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death.*" "Life," then, is the reward of obedience to God's law. So our scribe rises to ask our Lord what must be done to inherit "eternal life," and our Lord, seeing that he was testing him, asked him to answer his own question, which

he did. He gave the reply our Lord had himself given elsewhere, as reported in Mark and Matthew. “*You have answered correctly,*” our Lord said, “*do this and you will live.*”

But this time, the question of the “second” commandment — to love one’s neighbour as oneself — becomes the issue. The scholar of the Law, in order not to appear foolish for having answered his own question, asks who, then, is my “neighbour”? The Law, as in the Pentateuch and in particular in Leviticus, had so many prescriptions separating the children of Israel from others who might contaminate the purity of their belief. “Foreigners,” for instance, were scarcely looked upon as “neighbours” to be “loved” as one would love oneself. So it was that our Lord launched upon his famous parable of the Good Samaritan, which has become one of the great parables of world literature. In his story, our Lord depicted what might be said to be the spirit of things in the Judaism of the time: the priest passed by the half-dead person, as did the Levite. Revealed religion, as they perceived it, did

not cause them to show an effective concern for whoever might be in need. It should have, but it did not. “Religion” meant being noted for religious observance, but not for concern for one’s neighbour, whoever he might be and whatever might be his need. The second commandment, lying amid the numerous prescriptions of the Law, needed a grand Interpretation, and this it received from the One who was himself, in person, the Interpretation of the Law and the Prophets. One’s “neighbour” was to be regarded as *anyone in need* — as exemplified in the object of the attitude and behaviour of that heretic and foreigner, the Samaritan of the Parable. That is to say, one should be a true neighbour to anyone in need. The priest passed by. The Levite passed by. But the Samaritan, seeing the man half-dead by the roadside, was moved with compassion for him and spent time and money attending to his needs. This he did from compassion at the sight of him. Our Lord may have even been suggesting that he did this not so much from religious faith — from the knowledge that the God of the Patriarchs required it — but from his own good heart

and natural conscience, which is to say the natural law within him. This was pleasing to God, for this natural law within him, this natural conscience prompting him to hear and obey this law within, was a reflection of the voice of God. He was doing God's will, and this was pleasing to God. He was fulfilling the second commandment of the Law: to love one's neighbour as oneself.

The great task of life is to learn to love after the heart of Jesus Christ. Christ's heart is the exemplar of the heart which man must learn to acquire. This requires of a man both his own efforts (for man is not entirely depraved), and most especially the grace of God which will sustain his own efforts. The grace of God is made available to us in and through Jesus Christ. We must put on the mind of Jesus Christ, and this we do through faith and baptism. Then we must, aided by divine grace, work at our salvation and sanctification "with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12). This means striving to love God with all our heart, and our neighbour as ourself — with Jesus Christ as our life and our exemplar.

Second reflection:

God's will While there is a widespread lack of acceptance of Christ's Revelation, many more at least believe in the providence of God. That is to say, many have the sense that God is watching over them, and whatever their infidelities, they think of God as a good Spirit whom they can consider as their Father. Inadequate as this degree of belief is, at least it is a starting point. Granted God's providence in the life of each individual, what further can we say of his providential action in our regard? Many have the feeling (apart from its being revealed) that a good God is ever trying to reclaim us from a wayward course and bring us back to the path of his will. We are being gently pursued by a caring God who will be our Judge. We remember how Jonah was given a mission by God to preach repentance to the pagan people of Nineveh (Jonah 1:1-2) in order that they might be spared punishment for their sins. Jonah decides "to run away

from the Lord, and to go to Tarshish.” Indeed, throughout most of the book that follows, Jonah is constantly running away from God’s will. Mishap after mishap comes upon him, and behind it all, God was recalling him to his will. The course of these events was illuminated, we might presume, by the voice of Jonah’s conscience summoning him to return to the will of the Lord. Even the sailors around him echoed this message.

Let us renew our conviction that nothing that happens in our life is outside the will and the plan of God. All that happens to us is willed or permitted in view of his plan in our regard. St Paul says that God brings all things together for good to those who love him. So, let us choose to love him, and ultimately all will be well. Thinking of Jonah, let us renew our sense of the fatherly providence of God at work in the course of life’s events.



Tuesday of the twenty-seventh week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Est 4:17 Within your will, O Lord, all things are established, and there is none that can resist your will. For you have made all things, the heaven and the earth, and all that is held within the circle of heaven; you are the Lord of all.

Collect Almighty ever living God, who in the abundance of your kindness surpass the merits and the desires of those who entreat you, pour out your mercy upon us to pardon what conscience dreads and to give what prayer does not dare to ask. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Galatians 1:13-24; Psalm 138;

Luke 10:38-42

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the

Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me! Martha, Martha, the Lord answered, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her. (Luke 10:38-42)

Hearing the word Our Gospel scene today, in which our Lord “*came to a village and a woman named Martha welcomed him,*” seems from the context of Luke’s narrative to be situated in Galilee. In the same chapter, our Lord is reported condemning the Galilean towns of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum (Luke 10: 13-15). Luke does not expressly say that Martha and Mary were living in Galilee, and his inclusion of this incident at this point may be a literary device serving other of his purposes. There is no other mention by Luke of the two sisters, and he gives no reference to Lazarus. In the Gospel of St John, Martha, Mary and Lazarus are important figures

and John specifically tells us that they lived in Bethany, near Jerusalem: “*Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha*” (John 11:1). Of course, they may have moved from Galilee to the environs of Jerusalem, or John may be making it clear to those who had read the Gospel of St Luke that, as a matter of fact, they had lived near Jerusalem. In any case, John shows that a public event of great importance was associated with the three. That event was the dramatic raising of Lazarus from the dead at the threshold of the Passion (chapter 11), and it was preceded by a magnificent profession of faith in Jesus on the part of Martha (11:27). This raising of Lazarus is immediately followed by the account of Martha serving, of Lazarus dining at table with Jesus, and Mary anointing Jesus’ feet with the pure nard and wiping them with her hair (12:2-3). On that occasion our Lord speaks of his burial, and of his disciples not always having him with them (12:7-8). A few things are found to be in clear agreement between the accounts of Luke and John. Among them is the special friendship between Christ and

this household. In Luke, “*Martha welcomed him into her home*” (10:38). In John, the sisters send a message to Jesus saying that “*he whom you love is ill*” (11:3), and John tells us that “*Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus*” (11:5). Jesus himself refers to Lazarus as “*our friend*” (11:11). When Jesus arrived at Bethany he “*wept. So the Jews said, See how he loved him!*” (11:35-36).

One thing that is common to both John and Luke in their portrayals of the two sisters is in their characters. Martha is the active, outgoing disciple of generous service. Mary is the deeply contemplative disciple who shows love. Incidentally, while we learn from the correction directed by Christ at Martha, we also remember that Martha is celebrated in the Church’s liturgical year as a Saint. If (as have some) we identify Mary her sister as Mary Magdalene, then Mary is also celebrated as a Saint of the Church’s year. But we can by no means be sure that Mary the sister of Martha is indeed Mary Magdalene, and I, for one, do not believe that she is. Further, Lazarus, whom our Lord so much loved, is not celebrated as a Saint of the

Universal Church's liturgical year — Martha alone appears to have that honour. So then, that being stated, let us contemplate the scene provided us by the Gospel of St Luke today (Luke 10:38-42). It is Martha who welcomes Jesus — and perhaps others of his disciples too, because we read that “*as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him...*” (10:38). So there may have been other disciples in the house witnessing the event, and — who knows! — Luke's source may have been one of them. Perhaps the visit was sudden, unannounced, and Martha, overjoyed at having Jesus (and perhaps others of his disciples) in the house, bounded into her characteristic hospitality. But it was not easy, and amid the flurry she — as we might say — “lost it” a little. Luke tells us that she became “distracted” and, as shown in her words to Jesus about her unconcerned sister who was simply enjoying the teaching of the Master, became irritated. She boldly went to Jesus and asked him to tell her impractical sister to be up and doing. Luke uses the incident to recall for all time how

important Christ regards the gaze of the disciple on his very Person and a heartfelt hearing of his teaching. This is the foundation of discipleship and of all service of the Master. It must not be taken away, dispensed with, or neglected. It is on this basis that generous service of him and the Church — his disciples — must rest. One must hear the word of God first, and then put it into practice.

Mary *“sat at the Lord’s feet listening to what he said.”* What was Christ’s response to the pressing request to stop this and to be getting on with serving? He did not in any way criticize Martha for serving, but he gently and smilingly reminded her that its basis had to be listening to his word. This was the necessary thing, and it must never be taken away. *“Only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”* Prayer must never be taken away from us, that prayer which consists of being at the feet of Jesus, gazing at his Person in spirit, and listening to his word.

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Second reflection:

Repentance We read in the Book of Jonah that the prophet Jonah eventually “*set out and went to Nineveh in obedience to the word of the Lord*”, and there he preached repentance. On hearing Jonah’s announcement of the coming punishment, the pagan Ninevites recognised their sins and at the same time the goodness of God, and repented. This surely reminds us that many outside of the household of the faith can teach us what it means to be pleasing to God. The Ninevites in this inspired text remind us of the importance and the effectiveness of repentance, and of how even the pagan is capable of seeing this. Yet repentance is so frequently neglected! The Ninevites accepted that punishment for their sins was deserved and was coming, and that due to the goodness of God, it could be averted. St John the Baptist preached repentance and threatened punishment for those who did not repent. Our Lord spoke of hell fire, and said — speaking of several who had died accidentally — that unless his hearers repented they would perish too.

Let us take to heart the example of the Ninevites and aim at repentance. Indeed, we ought aim at constant repentance, ever starting again. So then, now I begin!



Wednesday of the twenty-seventh week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Est 4:17 Within your will, O Lord, all things are established, and there is none that can resist your will. For you have made all things, the heaven and the earth, and all that is held within the circle of heaven; you are the Lord of all.

Collect Almighty ever living God, who in the abundance of your kindness surpass the merits and the desires of those who entreat you, pour out your mercy upon us to pardon what conscience dreads and to give what prayer does not dare to ask. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Galatians 2:1-2.7-14; Psalm 116;

Luke 11:1-4

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, Lord, teach us

to pray, just as John taught his disciples. He said to them, When you pray, say: ‘Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation.’ (Luke 11:1-4)

The Lord’s Prayer There are two versions of the prayer that Jesus Christ taught his disciples. There is our version of today, provided by the Gospel of St Luke. There is Matthew’s version in the Sermon on the Mount — which appears as a teaching to his disciples (Matthew 5:1-2), and yet which “the crowds” seem also to have heard (7:28). Matthew’s version of this Prayer is preceded by our Lord’s twofold directive that, firstly, prayer be “*to your Father who is in secret*” — and not to gain the praise of men. Secondly, prayer should be simple and trusting — and not a lot of gabble and patter like the prayer of the Gentiles (Matthew 6:6-7). While the context of Matthew’s version is the Sermon on the Mount, the context of Luke’s is the sight of our Lord himself praying (11:1). Luke’s version (Luke 11: 1-4) is simpler than Matthew’s, perhaps

reflecting our Lord's teaching of it in different contexts and for slightly different purposes. In Matthew, the Prayer begins by addressing God as "our Father," while in Luke it begins simply with, "Father." Matthew's form, "our Father," manifests the common Fatherhood of God both for mankind generally and for all those in Christ, and perhaps a more liturgical context. Luke's simpler form of address may reflect a little more our Lord's own usage (for our Lord himself addressed the Father simply as "Father") and perhaps a more individual or personal use of the Prayer. Notably, two of the petitions in Matthew are missing from Luke's version, though of course they are implied by the preceding petitions. In Luke, following "*Your Kingdom come*" — and the "*Kingdom of God*" pervades the preaching of our Lord in Luke's Gospel — the Prayer passes on to the request that the Father "*forgive us our sins.*" Matthew, though, after praying that "*your Kingdom come,*" asks that "*Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*" (6:10). Matthew, then, makes explicit what is implied — namely that the will of the Father may prevail

on earth just as it is willingly received in heaven. “Heaven” is a kind of template or paradigm of the goal of man’s striving on earth, and is this world’s final goal — the essence of it being the “will” of God. Luke’s version also, with its last request for protection against temptation, omits Matthew’s final petition to “deliver us from evil.”

It is Matthew’s slightly longer version which the Church has usually preferred to inculcate and which she has used liturgically. Luke’s version of today illustrates for us the great simplicity of Christian prayer. It is to be noted that at no point in the Gospels is Christ shown to be praying this Prayer with his disciples, suggesting that it is not only a prayer to be prayed by the Christian and by the Church, but it is a general *guide* to Christian prayer as well. Such has the Church used it, for it is the basis of the Church’s official teaching on prayer. In numerous commentaries on this Prayer, the Church’s saints and doctors have expounded on how we are to pray, and the Church herself in her official catechisms has done the same. Most notably, in the great *Catechism of the Council*

of Trent published by Pope St Pius V, and in its successor *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, published by Pope St John Paul II — with the aid of his main assistant, the future Benedict XVI — the Lord's Prayer is the foundation of the Church's official account. Pope St Paul VI died with the Lord's Prayer on his lips. Perhaps the most serious danger lies in the old hazard of routine. Every Christian knows the Lord's Prayer. It is one of the first things he is taught. He knows it by heart and he repeats it time and again throughout life. It can become precisely what our Lord warns us about in giving it to us: gabble and patter, like the prayer of the pagans. We must attend to its meaning, and what can help us here is the realization that its roots lie deep in the Scriptures. Nearly all the elements of the prayer of our Lord have counterparts in the Old Testament, such as in Isaiah 63:15-16, Ezekiel 36:23 and 38:23, 1 Samuel 3:18, Proverbs 30:8, and Psalm 119:133. In fact, I would recommend that the Prayer be always thought of as being within the context of the Scriptures generally, and not as free-standing and therefore lacking

Christ's own profoundly Jewish roots. It is the Prayer that comes from the lips of Christ, and Christ is the Promise and Fulfilment of the Scriptures. Let us cultivate that image of the Lord's Prayer — it is surrounded and suffused by a wealth of inspired allusions.

Let us treasure the Prayer Jesus Christ taught his disciples — especially to be noted in Luke's account is that he taught them this after they had seen him praying. So he is the model of how we ought pray this Prayer. We ought pray it, thinking of Christ our Brother and our Intercessor praying. He is not only the model. He is our life as we pray it, which is to say that we pray this Prayer contemplating the risen Jesus in whom we live and by whose grace we pray. It is a precious Prayer, the paradigm of all prayer and one which ought shape our entire life of prayer.

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Second reflection: (Luke 11:1-4)

“One of his disciples said, Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.”

We ought often contemplate our Lord at prayer. He prayed at night — all night long, at times. He prayed in the synagogue, and in the Temple at Jerusalem. He prayed in agony before his Passion. So profound was our Lord’s prayer that his disciples, having seen him at prayer, wanted him to teach them to pray (Luke 11: 1-4). How good it would be to be taught by Christ to pray! In fact, we have been given a share in Christ’s own Spirit, and St Paul tells us that his Spirit cries out in our own hearts, *Abba! Father!* The Holy Spirit is our sanctifier and our teacher. He will teach us to pray as Christ taught his disciples, if we ask him, and if we faithfully follow the Church’s guidance. So, let us constantly ask the Holy Spirit to help us to pray as we take to heart the Lord’s Prayer, the prayer our Lord taught his disciples. Let us make it a lifelong object of our meditation on how to pray. Let us especially notice that

Christ asks us to pray that his Kingdom come. St Monica, for one, prayed constantly for years for the conversion of her wayward son, Augustine. Her prayers were heard, and he became one of the most influential saints in the Church's history.

Let us ask the Holy Spirit to help us to pray, and let us pray as our Lord taught us to pray.



Thursday of the twenty-seventh week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Est 4:17 Within your will, O Lord, all things are established, and there is none that can resist your will. For you have made all things, the heaven and the earth, and all that is held within the circle of heaven; you are the Lord of all.

Collect Almighty ever living God, who in the abundance of your kindness surpass the merits and the desires of those who entreat you, pour out your mercy upon us to pardon what conscience dreads and to give what prayer does not dare to ask. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Galatians 3:1-5; Psalm Luke 1;

Luke 11:5-13

Then Jesus said to them, Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on

a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.’ Then the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’ I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man’s boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs. So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! (Luke 11: 5-13)

Prayer If there is one thing that ought be characteristic of “religion,” it is prayer. There are, of course, modern understandings of “religion” which regard it as a man’s dedication to the ultimate values of his life.

In this sense, a man's consuming interest in sport, or in his own professional advancement, or in some temporal ideology such as Marxism, is a "religion." He may not know that it is, in effect, his "religion," and in its command of his heart it may far exceed the formal religion which he considers himself to accept. His Catholic faith may be purely notional and nominal, while his all-consuming dedication to the policies of his political party may be, virtually, a "religion" for him. Obviously, there would be little or no prayer in the life of such a one as this. Or again, he may accept a deity but its reality may scarcely touch him. The famous Tom Paine (1737-1809) was an author, pamphleteer, radical, inventor, intellectual, revolutionary, and one of the founding fathers of the United States. In his well-known work, *The Age of Reason*, he writes: "I do not believe in the creed professed by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church." What kind of a God did he allow for? His religion consisted, he wrote, in contemplating the power, wisdom, and benignity of the Deity in his works, and in endeavouring to imitate him in

everything moral, scientific, and mechanical. I can scarcely imagine that Thomas Paine prayed much — he was certainly resolutely opposed to Christian revelation and insisted on a reliance in all things on “Reason” and “Common Sense.” One character in American literature which portrays the deist soul is the “Pathfinder” of James Fenimore Cooper’s novel (of the same name as the character). The novel appeared in 1840 and, in the Pathfinder character, the novel may be regarded as a fruit of the Enlightenment era, while containing elements of the new Romanticism. The Pathfinder, hero of the American wilds and unsurpassed with his rifle, himself is of a firm deist belief and at one point remotely acknowledges a redemption from sin. But he is never portrayed as *praying* to his Creator. What I am saying is that there is a modern notion of “religion” which has little place in it for prayer.

But this is profoundly at variance with the testimony of the religions of mankind. Prayer has always been regarded as inextricably at the root of religion. To claim to be religious, and to regard oneself as being religious, and to

be portrayed as being religious and *never to pray* — as in Cooper’s Pathfinder, winning character as he is — would be ridiculous according to the voice of mankind. In fact, prayer may be regarded as one of the most profoundly recurring activities of man. Just as man may be described not merely as a “rational” animal but as a “religious” one, so he may be described as a “praying” animal. Man prays, both individually and as a community. As sociologists, anthropologists and historians understand, his culture is characteristically pervaded by the practice of prayer and religion — the exception being modern secular society, in which God has become an optional private persuasion. Now, this is not just a question of sociological phenomena. It is a matter of life and death. St Alphonsus Liguori writes somewhere in his multi-volume works that it is very difficult to be saved without prayer, and specifically without the prayer of petition. In fact, it is precisely the prayer of petition which is so characteristic of the life and history of man — he and his community cry out to the Unseen for aid in their need. Prayer is the most natural,

universal and persistent thing in the world. It is what we tend to do unless we have allowed ourselves to be overtaken by a philosophy that renders us sceptical and then blind to what we instinctively know — that there is a God who aids us. All of this brings us to our immensely consoling Gospel today, in which Christ urges us to ask God our heavenly Father for what we need. He also tells us what God is especially desirous of giving us, and therefore of what we especially need. That munificent Gift, that Gift of which we have so much need, is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God by means of whom God created the world and redeemed it through his Son our Lord. *“If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”* (Luke 11: 5-13). Let us pray for this, and never cease praying for it.

The corollary of this is that we should — for it is a duty — feel confident that God will hear our prayers if in our prayers we wish to please him. Our Lord makes it

clear that prayer is not fruitless, even if we do not see the intervention of God taking effect before our eyes. Christ does not promise that. He promises that God will hear our prayers even if we do not see him doing this, nor how he does it, nor in what sense he does it. But answer our prayers he will if we pray with faith and persistence, endeavouring all the while to pray in accordance with his will. How great will be the good we shall do, if we persist in asking God for our needs and the needs of others!

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Second reflection: (Luke 11:5-11)

“So I say to you: Ask, and it will be given to you”

Once a lady told me of the success her prayers seemed to be having. She had been asked to pray for someone who was seriously ill. She approached others as well, to pray for this intention, and they persevered in prayer. She then had the joy of being approached by the relative of the sick person with the news he was improving.

One of the characteristics of some religiously observant people is that they do not really believe that their prayers will make any difference. They do not believe much in the prayer of petition. It implies that they do not believe in God's active power and love, and in his promise that he will answer prayer. Of course, this faith is a gift, and it ought to be prayed for because if we do not believe that our prayers of petition will make any difference, we will not pray such prayers. If we do not ask God for much, we may not receive much. St Alphonsus Liguori wrote that one reason why people do not receive a lot more from God

than they do is that they do not ask God for much. In our Gospel passage today (Luke 11: 5-11) Our Lord teaches us that we must not only ask for what we need, but we must persist in asking. Our prayer should be persevering, and we ought especially ask for the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier. A father knows how to be generous with his child when his child asks for something that is good for him. *“How much more,”* our Lord comments, *“will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”*

Let us take to heart our Lord’s enormously important teaching on the prayer of petition. Let us pray for the faith to ask God for much, especially for whatever aids our quest for holiness.



Friday of the twenty-seventh week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Est 4:17 Within your will, O Lord, all things are established, and there is none that can resist your will. For you have made all things, the heaven and the earth, and all that is held within the circle of heaven; you are the Lord of all.

Collect Almighty ever living God, who in the abundance of your kindness surpass the merits and the desires of those who entreat you, pour out your mercy upon us to pardon what conscience dreads and to give what prayer does not dare to ask. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Galatians 3:7-14; Psalm 110;

Luke 11:15-26

Some people said of Jesus, It is by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that he is driving out demons. Others tested him by asking for a sign from heaven. Jesus knew

their thoughts and said to them: Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall. If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand? I say this because you claim that I drive out demons by Beelzebub. Now if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your followers drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are safe. But when someone stronger attacks and overpowers him, he takes away the armour in which the man trusted and divides up the spoils. He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters. When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' When it arrives, it finds the house swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the

final condition of that man is worse than the first. (Luke 11:15-26)

God and Satan There is an odd ambiguity in modern culture when it comes to the matter of Satan. I have seen prominent advertisements that depict demons as mischievous, yet basically good-natured, imps. That is to say, a demon — including the arch-demon — is scarcely to be taken seriously. Anyone who accepts divine revelation knows that demons ought, rather, be depicted as ruthless, cunning and murderous spirits of the very worst order, devoid of any redeeming features. On the other hand, there is plenty of literature on demon possession and the menacing Occult, and, interestingly, it is the Catholic Church and her priest who is usually the successful foe of this remorseless, hellish Agent. This sort of thing is generally overdone, but it bears witness to the opposite of the secular scepticism towards things religious and unseen. Now, the most secure reference point for any talk of Satan and the demons is the four Gospels, and in particular the words and public ministry of Jesus Christ. There is a

manifest leap in references to Satan between the books of the Old Testament and those of the New. In Genesis 3, Satan is present in the Garden as the Serpent. He is a fallen being in the sense that he is personally evil, and is a cunning force for evil. Isaiah 14: 12-15 has often been understood as an inspired picture of Satan's Fall: *"How you have fallen from heaven, O star of the morning, son of the dawn! You have been cut down to the earth, you who have weakened the nations! But you said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of GodI will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.' Nevertheless you will be thrust down to Sheol, to the recesses of the pit."* Ezekiel 28:12-17 has also been used to describe his Fall from heaven. But all up, Satan has no special prominence in what Christians call the Old Testament. He is introduced in the Garden as the cunning Serpent (Genesis 3:1-5) and he wreaks havoc by tempting the Woman to be a god, like the one God. He is the Adversary of Job (Job 1 and 2), trying to use suffering to turn Job from God, but fails. In 1

Chronicles 21: 1, Satan (or, “a Satan”) is the Adversary of Israel, enticing David into proudly taking his census. In Zechariah 3: 1-2, he is the Adversary and Accuser of Joshua the high priest.

This shadowy Element occasionally appearing in the Inspired Scrolls suddenly bursts into full view with the arrival of the conquering and all-holy Messiah. Before Christ even begins his public ministry — which is to say, immediately after the designation of him by John the Precursor — Satan solemnly makes his approach. As in the Garden, here too in the wilderness he appears and speaks to Christ. He treats this Man with respect, and makes an enticing offer. He will give Jesus the world, for he is worthy of it. There is one condition — the Man who might be (“if you are”) “the Son of God” must acknowledge him — indeed, worship him, no less. But oh! How different is this Man from the first one, and from the Woman who drew him along with her. This time Satan was shown the door. At that, the battle was joined, and Satan and his minions appear throughout the Gospel

narratives in a way and with an abundance unprecedented in the history of Israel and in its Inspired Writings. There is no quarter. The very approach of Jesus sends the demons squealing in fear and frustration. His word sends them forth from their sorry abodes and leaves him master of their fields. Behind these constant skirmishes, the arch-demon is at work — he will put an end to this second Adam, and he is busy about it. Indeed, he gains successful entry into the circle of the Messiah himself. Our Lord told Simon that Satan had sought to sift them all like wheat — to get to the elements that he could make his own. And, to a point, he was successful. When Christ announced the Eucharist, he also said that one of the Twelve was *a devil*. At the Last Supper, Satan entered Judas. Our Gospel today is one of several utterances by our Lord on the reality and character of Satan and his minions. “*Any kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and a house divided against itself will fall. If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand?*” There are two kingdoms, our Lord here tells us: there is Satan’s kingdom, and God’s

Kingdom: “*if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come to you*” (Luke 11: 15-26). God’s Kingdom is far the stronger, but man must be vigilant.

St Ignatius Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises* gives us a Meditation which we ought ponder long and hard. There are two Standards — one is that of Christ, and the other is that of Satan. It is as serious as that, and we have no business making light of Satan. He is out to tempt us so as to take away from the honour and glory we might give to the Lord God. He wants nothing other than our destruction, so as to spoil the work of God. Our Redeemer and our Friend is he whom the devils called the Holy One of God. Let us take our stand with him, then, and never leave him!

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Second reflection: (Luke 11:15-26)

“So too with Satan; if he is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand?” In our Gospel today (Luke 11: 15-26) we are immediately presented with the fight between Christ and Satan — and it is a fight indeed. Jesus had just cast out a demon, and following this he refers to the kingdom and the household of Satan. This satanic “kingdom” or “household” pits itself against the “kingdom” and the household of Christ, which is the Church his body.

But in thinking of the household of Christ we also think of the one who is the Mother and Model of this household under Christ: Mary. On October 7, we celebrate the memorial of Our Lady of the Rosary. We think of Mary as she accompanies us in praying this highly recommended prayer of the Church. The Church has for a very long time praised the Rosary and repeatedly urged it on her children. Papal Encyclicals have been written about the Rosary, and its devout recitation has been rewarded

with rich indulgences. This guarantees that God blesses with great graces the fervent private and communal praying of this prayer. If we want to be holy, we ought take the Rosary seriously.

This is relevant to our Gospel passage today because the history of devotion to Our Lady of the Rosary links it to the fight against Satan and all that threatens the Christian life and civilization. Let us resolve to seek Christ in company with Mary our Mother and our Model by means of a loving and attentive praying of the Rosary.



Saturday of the twenty-seventh week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Est 4:17 Within your will, O Lord, all things are established, and there is none that can resist your will. For you have made all things, the heaven and the earth, and all that is held within the circle of heaven; you are the Lord of all.

Collect Almighty ever living God, who in the abundance of your kindness surpass the merits and the desires of those who entreat you, pour out your mercy upon us to pardon what conscience dreads and to give what prayer does not dare to ask. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Galatians 3:22-29; Psalm 104;

Luke 11:27-28

As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, Blessed is the mother who gave you birth

and nursed you. He replied, Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it. (Luke 11:27-28)

Obeing the word It is impossible to express adequately the wonder of the Incarnation. It is the Event of all events, the Occurrence which makes of all other occurrences in the universe puny satellites of a gigantic star. We speak of the Big Bang as starting it all — and of course, granted a Big Bang, it did start it all. But when it comes to the Incarnation, no other happening in the universe can possibly compare with it — and yet it happened ever so quietly. The great God, limitless in being and in every respect, became man. By the power of the Holy Spirit, he was conceived of the Virgin Mary and took unto himself a human nature exactly like ours without the deformation and crippling infirmity of sin. Without laying aside his own divine nature, he thenceforth possessed as well a human mind, will, imagination, temperament and all the normal battery of human characteristics. God the Son thenceforth had his own human DNA, derived overwhelmingly from his mother who was, by the power

and intervention of the Spirit of God, the single human agent in his conception. She then carried in her womb the infinite God become limited man, while remaining the God he always was. This or that man, in virtue of his material wealth, might be said to be, as we say, “a pot of gold.” Another might carry around with him the prestige of his profession — he is, say, the prime minister. Another carries with him other accomplishments that win him acclaim, arising from his work. But Mary carried with her the Son of God made man. She, a creature, was the very mother of God. How stupendous her dignity! With good reason did the woman in the crowd call out in wonder as she gazed on the magnificent prophet before her, “*Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and who nursed you.*” The woman did not know Mary — she was gazing on the Man before her, and could not help but wonder at how blessed his mother was in having such a Son. Mary herself, in the same Gospel from which our passage is taken, had said that all generations to come would call her blessed, because the Mighty God had done such great

things for her (Luke 1:48-49). But our Lord immediately pointed to what God regards as especially, and indeed as more, important.

Our Lord did not say his mother was not blessed in having him as her Son — she was blessed indeed in being the mother of him who is God. But even more blessed was she in hearing the word of God and obeying it: “*He replied, Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it*” (Luke 11: 27-28). In a real sense, her becoming the mother of the Lord was founded on her obedience to God. She heard and obeyed, and with that the Lord God came to dwell within her. In her particular case, God’s coming was of a unique and stupendous kind: God came to her to take flesh of her flesh, and to abide within her as her very son. But the pattern of God’s action is what we ought also notice: she heard God’s word, she obeyed it, and God came to her to dwell with her. This is the pattern of revealed religion. God spoke to Abraham. Abraham heard God’s word and obeyed it, and God came to abide with him as his God. It was the same with Isaac and Jacob, and

with Moses, and with the people he chose for his own. The promise was, if you obey my word, I shall be your God and you will be my people. Yahweh is my name, which is to say: I who AM will be with you! This my presence with you will be threatened if you choose to disobey my word, and if you abandon me as your God. Let us note the pattern: God speaks, and if we hear and obey his word, he will be with us. He will be God-with-us, and his abode will be with us. The initiative is always his, and he is merciful. He forgives the one who turns to him in contrition and who resolves to hear and to obey — he will dwell with him as his God. Now, we are part of this in a wondrous way. For our Lord's promise is, *"You will live on in my love if you keep my commandments, even as I have kept my Father's commandments and live in his love"* (John 15:10). If we keep his commandments and live in his love, he will come to us and abide with us: *"Anyone who loves me will be true to my word, and my Father will love him; we will come to him and make our dwelling place with him"* (John 14:23). The great result of the Incarnation

is the divine dwelling with man — and for us, it means the Divine Indwelling in us.

Mary became the mother of the Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ who is our God. She heard the word of the Lord and obeyed it, and the Word became flesh within her and dwelt within her. She was blessed for being the mother of the Lord, and for hearing the word of God and obeying it. We must take our cue from her who is the mother and model of the Church, the first and foremost Christian. Let us resolve to hear the word of God and obey it. Thus shall we live in the love of God, and he will come, Father, Son and Spirit, and make his abode within us. In this we shall be like Mary, who is the perfect human reflection of him who is the Image of the Unseen God.

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Second reflection: (Luke 11:27-28)

“As Jesus was speaking, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said, “Blessed is the womb that bore you...””

There is one thing the Christian must do if he is ever to become a true disciple of the Master: he must contemplate the Person and the word of Jesus. Christianity is not simply a doctrine nor simply the embrace of a doctrine, though it includes that. It is not simply a profoundly right course of action, or being an ethical person, though it includes that. Nor is it just care and charity, though it is that too. It is above all a knowledge and love for Jesus — expressed, of course, in prayer, right belief, right action, care and charity. This knowledge and love for Jesus requires that we contemplate him regularly, daily, and that we fill our daily work with the fruit of this regular gaze (by the mind and heart) on the loveable and admirable person of Jesus Christ. We are reminded of this contemplation by our Gospel passage today (Luke 11: 27-

28). A woman in the crowd had been hearing him speaking, and in the process had been contemplating him. She raised her voice to praise him, by praising his mother: *“Happy the womb that bore you!”* We too ought be like that woman in her contemplation of the Person of Jesus speaking his word. But our Lord deflects the praise from himself in order to praise the one who hears the word of God and puts it into practice. Undoubtedly the ideal hearer of the word, the one just referred to, was in his mind as he spoke this: Mary his own mother. Mary contemplated her Son to perfection, hearing his words and putting them perfectly into practice.

Let us resolve to be with Jesus regularly, every day contemplating his Person and his word.



Twenty-eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 130 (129):3-4 If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But with you is found forgiveness, O God of Israel.

Collect May your grace, O Lord, we pray, at all times go before us and follow after and make us always determined to carry out good works. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 25:6-10a; Psalm 23:1-6;
Philippians 4:12-14, 19-20; Matthew 22:1-14

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. Then he sent some more servants and said, 'Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have

been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.’ But they paid no attention and went off — one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, ill-treated them and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, ‘The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.’ So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. ‘Friend,’ he asked, ‘how did you get in here without wedding clothes?’ The man was speechless. Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are invited, but few are chosen. (Matthew 22:1-14)

Desires of the Spirit

St Paul's words at the beginning of the Second Reading are, needless to say, important: "*I know how to be poor and I know how to be rich. I am ready for anything anywhere: full stomach or empty stomach, poverty or plenty*" (Philippians 4:12). St Paul was not greedy, avaricious, envious nor covetous. He accepted what God chose to place in his hands and across his path for the doing of his will, whether "*full stomach or empty stomach, poverty or plenty.*" The one important thing was to love Christ and to do his will. In the Gospel parable (Matthew 22: 1 14), "*some ignored the invitation*" of the master. Why? They did this because of their preferences, one for "his farm," another for "his business." They coveted other things. We are reminded of what our Lord said to Martha when she came to him complaining about her sister Mary. Martha was not covetous, but our Lord's words apply to those who are. "*Martha, Martha, you worry and fret about many things. Few are needed, only one.*" The Tenth Commandment teaches us that we are not to covet our neighbour's goods. Covetousness relates

to what the heart desires and intends. There have been religions in the history of man which concern man's observable behaviour and little else. As long as the ceremonies or the observances are kept up, all is well. The religion revealed by our Lord concerns all of man's activity, and not only activity that is observable. It especially concerns what man chooses to desire. Our religion is above all a religion of the heart, for as our Lord said on one occasion, it is from within a man's "heart" that there proceeds the good and the bad in his life. Christ came to transform our hearts into the likeness of his own. With the sustaining aid of grace, we must try to conform the desires of our hearts to those of the heart of Christ — and God's grace will effect what we desire. For example, our Lord commanded that we forgive "from the heart." He commands that we actually "love" God with all our "heart" and that we "love" our neighbour as ourselves. We are not to settle with merely acting towards God and others correctly. Love is a matter of the heart, which is to say,

especially of the will. The roots of a man's life are found in his heart, and it is our heart that must be sanctified.

Let us remember that our heart is the seat of our desires, and desires arise naturally from the heart. Desire as such is, therefore, good provided it truly serves our nature. God means us to be possessed of desire — for imagine a person who had no desire for anything! For instance, a person who has no desire to eat requires psychiatric and medical attention. A married man who had no desire to earn money is seriously failing his family. God wants us to be persons of great desires. The saint may not desire material prosperity, but he is still a person with powerful desires, but those desires serve his nature wonderfully. They are desires for *God and his holy will*. So it is an excellent thing to cultivate great desires for what we do not have, provided they are well ordered and are desires for what God wants us to have. We ought strongly desire what God directs us to seek, and what our human nature clearly needs if we are to flourish properly. The problem is that because of our fallen condition, a

wholesome inclination to gain things easily becomes disordered, unwholesome and harmful. For instance, a person may have an ambition to make his way in his profession, which will mean greater responsibilities and the opportunity of doing greater good. But he might find himself hoping that a person who occupies a higher position will get sick, so that he will have the chance of gaining that job. He covets his neighbour's goods and wishes him harm. In 1 Timothy 6:10, St Paul writes that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Greed for more things will stifle and replace the growth of love for God and others in one's heart. Envy can lead to immensely serious consequences. It involves a sadness at not having another's goods, and if it leads to wanting or intending serious harm on another, it is a mortal sin. King David even arranged the murder of Uriah because he coveted Uriah's wife — he broke the Ninth Commandment. He was envious of Uriah. We ought struggle against all envy and instead rejoice in another's progress and good fortune. In this way God will be glorified. St Augustine saw envy

as an especially “diabolical sin”, for as the Scriptures tell us, “*through the devil’s envy death entered the world*” (Wisdom 2:24).

Love for God and neighbour, together with God’s grace, is the one thing we ought passionately desire. All other desires ought be part of and subordinate to this desire. This is the one thing necessary, and it is the Holy Spirit who imparts to us this noble desire for God. Let us nourish and protect it. He gives us the grace to resist all covetousness, and to replace it with love. “Let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus”, St Paul writes Christ Jesus who did not cling to his glory as God but gave up his riches that we might be rich. God our Father thus manifested in extraordinary fashion love alone. Let us aim to be like him as his true children.

Further reading: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No.2535-2543 (Covetousness and the Desires of the Spirit)



Monday of the twenty-eighth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 130 (129):3-4 If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But with you is found forgiveness, O God of Israel.

Collect May your grace, O Lord, we pray, at all times go before us and follow after and make us always determined to carry out good works. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Galatians 4:22-24.26-27.31-5:1;
Psalm 112; Luke 11:29-32

While still more people gathered in the crowd, Jesus said to them, “This generation is an evil generation; it seeks a sign, but no sign will be given it, except the sign of Jonah. Just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. At the judgment the queen of the south will rise with the men of this generation and she will condemn them, because she came

from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and there is something greater than Solomon here. At the judgment the men of Nineveh will arise with this generation and condemn it, because at the preaching of Jonah they repented, and there is something greater than Jonah here.” (Luke 11:29-32)

Divine patterns One of the many reasons why the moral quality of parenting is so critical is that a child’s parents and what they say, being the *first* human influences the child knows and accepts into his soul, become patterns and types for the child’s future perceptions and experiences. Those who are like his parents in belief and culture are more readily accepted by the child. The child’s moral standards tend to be those followed and taught by the parents and primary persons of the child’s emerging life. What the child sees and hears in his parents, guardians, educators and early companions tend to be types in the child’s mind for what it is to be human, and for how a human being should act. They are the “myths,” let us say, that provide the basic framework of life. It is not at all

easy to transcend and leave behind the influence of these origins. For this reason, a conversion to a different religion or Church, or the passing over to a profoundly different political party, can amount to a great leap which the majority may never take because of the power of fundamental “myths” or paradigms. Those origins, as in the remembered events and persons that constitute them, tend to be the patterns for life ahead. They “make sense” of new persons, events, experiences. Now, this is entirely wholesome and natural. Families, tribes, communities and nations have their “myths,” their remembered origins, their “heroes,” their received paradigms and criteria for life and action. It is the way God has made us to function and to grow — provided, of course, the process is progressively disciplined and guided by correct and objective criteria. We cannot be entirely bound by such paradigms because they themselves are but human and prone to error — at times great and tragic error which must be transcended and renounced. The good news is that in the matter of what is most important of all — religion and our relationship with

God — God has not left us with human influences alone. He has revealed himself over time, in fact over a long time. In the process he has provided us with a rich fare of entirely reliable and objective “myths” and paradigms, inspired and historical, which are our guide for true religion.

The greatest and most wondrous Guide given to humanity is the living Person of Jesus Christ, One who walked the earth at a certain point of history, and who lives now in all his glory, not only at the right hand of God in heaven, but with us in his body the Church. He is the true and objective “Myth” that gives meaning to everything, but in his case the Myth is a clear and objective Fact. The point I wish to make here, though, is that our Lord himself was preceded by the great origins and history of God’s dealing with his chosen people. These origins and this history constituted a progressively unfolding set of paradigms and pointers to what was coming, namely the Messiah himself. Their purpose was to enable the Promised One to be interpreted and accepted when he

came. It was all part of a piece, and a person who was steeped in the Holy Writings and who was submissive to their divine Author, would be equipped to receive the Messiah. Our Lord himself frequently, clearly and with originality showed how he fulfilled the Scriptures, and how the Scriptures pointed to him. He appealed to their figures to illustrate himself. If we ourselves are steeped in the Inspired Writings prior to Jesus Christ, together with a spirit of submission to God who authored them, we shall be equipped in a special way to appreciate his Person and teaching. The figures and events that populate those Writings are types of him, of his work and of his teaching. Our Gospel passage today (Luke 11:29-32) offers an illustration of this very important point. There were many who were, in a reluctant and recalcitrant fashion, challenging our Lord to prove his credentials to them by providing them with “signs” from heaven. He dismisses their demand (he was providing such signs continually in his miracles), and appeals to the “sign” of Jonah and Solomon. Both these figures were, in their limited ways,

types of the One to come. They illustrated him, and he evoked their memory as inspired illustrations of his divinely-ordained way of working. They are two instances of many other types of the One who would be the Fulfilment of all. Jesus Christ is the New Adam. He is the New Moses. He is The Prophet. In his person Jonah pointed to him, as did Solomon, but he was far more.

Let us enrich our appreciation of Jesus Christ the Lord of all lords, by immersing ourselves in the Gospels first of all, of course, and then in the rest of the New Testament writings, but also in the Inspired Writings before Jesus Christ — the Old Testament. Let us follow the Church's liturgical practice in respect to the proclamation of the Gospel. She presents us for our contemplation the entire Holy Bible. She points to Christ, but with Moses on one side, and Elijah on the other — and they are conversing with him as they did on the holy Mount. They pointed to him, and were types of him, enabling us to appreciate the One who is the Summit of all.

Second reflection:

Jesus Christ Both in living our Catholic Faith and in bringing it to others (which as disciples of the Lord ought be our ambition), we need to have a clear idea of just what our Catholic Faith — which is the Gospel — is about. Catholicism is not a simple matter, for it is rich and many sided. Nevertheless, at its heart and in its broad outline, there need be no doubt in our minds as to what we are talking about when we speak of the Gospel. The Gospel, as St Paul tells us, “*is about the Son of God.*” It is “*about Jesus Christ our Lord.*” The Person of Jesus in all he revealed himself to be is “*the Good News that God promised long ago through his prophets in the Scriptures.*” The call of the Gospel is, as St Paul writes to the Romans (1: 3-6), that we “*belong to Jesus Christ,*” and in this way to become “*saints.*” This call is addressed to all, including “*to all the pagans.*” It is a call to faith in his Person, a faith

which involves obedience to him as to God who reveals: it is “*the obedience of faith.*”

Our lives ought be profoundly marked by the spirit of obedience, obedience to God in Christ, to him who is the Head of the Church which speaks in his name. Cardinal Newman once wrote that the essence of religion is authority and obedience. Let us then entrust ourselves entirely to Jesus, making his full revelation the shining light of every aspect of our lives.



Tuesday of the twenty-eighth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 130 (129):3-4 If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But with you is found forgiveness, O God of Israel.

Collect May your grace, O Lord, we pray, at all times go before us and follow after and make us always determined to carry out good works. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Galatians 5:1-6; Ps. 118; Luke 11:37-41

After Jesus had spoken, a Pharisee invited him to dine at his home. He entered and reclined at table to eat. The Pharisee was amazed to see that he did not observe the prescribed washing before the meal. The Lord said to him, "Oh you Pharisees! Although you cleanse the outside of the cup and the dish, inside you are filled with plunder and evil. You fools! Did not the maker of the outside also make

the inside? But as to what is within, give alms, and behold, everything will be clean for you.” (Luke 11:37-41)

Christ’s way I cannot imagine John the Baptist being invited to dine at the home of a Pharisee, nor can I imagine the Baptist acting on such an invitation. He dwelt in the wilderness, clothed with camel’s hair and belt, eating locusts and wild honey. He became widely known as the prophet of the day, calling for repentance and announcing that the promised time had come. Out into the desert came people from Jerusalem, Judea, Galilee and other parts in order to hear him and to be baptized — which is to say, to express sorrow for sin and to receive from him a symbolic gesture of God’s pardon. To him there also came the Pharisees and Sadducees “for baptism” (Matthew 3:7), but it seems that their motive was scarcely sincere: they received from John a withering denunciation. “*You brood of vipers!*” he called them. There is no mention of their inviting him to dine at their sumptuous homes. But such is not the style of John’s successor, the One who, like Elisha following on Elijah, succeeded John’s demise, and who

manifestly had, as it were, (much more than) a double portion of his spirit. John declared that he, John, was not worthy to carry the Messiah's sandals (Matthew 3:11). This follows his words to the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 3: 7-10), suggesting that they heard this declaration. John knew that Jesus surpassed him in holiness ("*I need to be baptized by you*" Matthew 3:14), and once he had begun, Jesus in fact far outstripped him ("*all are coming to him,*" John's disciples reported, John 3: 26). But what do we see? Jesus is actually invited by the Pharisees to dine with them. Our incident today is not the only one of its kind. On an earlier occasion in the same Gospel we read how our Lord compared his own style of life with that of the Baptist: "*For John the Baptist came eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, he has a demon; the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'*" (Luke 7:33-35). Our Lord's regimen was not that of the Baptist. He did not live on locusts and wild honey, nor did he dress in camel's hair,

nor live in the wilderness — and this was in order to gain hearts. Then, immediately after this contrast between himself and John, we read that “*one of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house and took his place at the table*” (Luke 7:36).

It is said, incidentally, that the Pharisees did not readily invite those outside their class to dine with them. That they invited Jesus suggests the esteem which Jesus of Nazareth was commanding among many of them. He was victorious in any encounter with them over the meaning of the Scriptures, and he spoke with an authority that far transcended — in the eyes of the people — that of the scribes. All addressed him as “Rabbi,” even the scribes. We read in John’s Gospel that Nicodemus, one of the Pharisees, addressed Jesus as “Rabbi” and acknowledged that he and at least many of his colleagues knew that he, Jesus, came from God. His works made this obvious (John 3: 2). Not only did Jesus command a respect which could not be dismissed nor ignored, but he unhesitatingly confronted them, attacked them, and silenced them when

needed. Yet he is invited to dine with them — in Luke 7: 36 he is invited to the house of Simon the Pharisee, and in our Gospel today (Luke 11:37-41), he is invited to another of the Pharisees. It appears that others of their class were present, and some lawyers too, for our Lord denounces many of both groups during the meal (11: 39-52). It would seem that our Lord's whole manner and lifestyle drew people to his company — even, in a sense, those who were his enemies. They extended invitations to him and he accepted those invitations. There was nothing about our Lord which kept people at a distance from him, with the one exception of their deliberately un-repentant sin. The tax collectors and sinners wanted to be with him and to hear him. He dined with them too. The grand exceptions were the hardening higher echelons of the Pharisee, Sadducee and lawyer classes, in a word the Temple aristocracy and their coterie. Our Lord was not bending to them. He was the Truth, and the Way and the Life, and even Pilate could see that the “chief priests” had handed him over to him for condemnation because of their envy

(Mark 15:10). The only thing that kept people separated from Jesus Christ was their sin. He himself drew people to him, including, as we see in the Gospels, many of the Pharisees themselves. We read that “*indeed, among the rulers also many believed in him*” but they feared the consequences of this being known (John 12:42-43).

Our Gospel today shows our Lord being invited to the house of a Pharisee, and his accepting this invitation. Our Lord, whom even the demons called the Holy One of God, and whom the people and the scribes and Pharisees themselves addressed as Rabbi, dines in the home of a well-to-do Pharisee. It speaks volumes of his missionary style and his divine magnanimity. Jesus Christ loves all, but most especially the lowly and repentant. How he wished to see the Pharisees, the lawyers, the Sadducees and all the leaders, repent! He made himself all things to all men in order that he might save some — as St Paul described himself as doing (1 Corinthians 9:22). Let us every day take our place in the company of our divine

Friend and Master, and resolve to live in him.

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Second reflection:

Sin and the truth In his Letter to the Romans, St Paul refers to culpable ignorance of the truth about God. He tells us that it is most serious because “*what can be known about God is perfectly plain to them since God himself has made it plain.*” Of course, St Paul was referring to ignorance in an almost universally religious environment. The context was pagan but religious — the unseen world was accepted and taken for granted as a reality. Our own culture does not take this for granted at all — it is one that verges on an agnosticism and practical atheism, which can make it difficult for some to attain belief. In modern philosophical discussion, for example, it is a great question whether there is a supernatural realm at all. Nevertheless, what St Paul says about the ignorance of men in respect to God is a warning to all the ages: “*people*

are without excuse: they knew God and yet refused to honour him as God or to thank him” (Romans 1: 20-21). And why is this, in St Paul’s inspired account? Men “*suppress the truth by their wickedness*” (1:18). So at root, it is a moral matter, a matter of moral disposition. God’s anger is directed against the “*impiety and depravity of men*” that leads them to “*refuse to honour him as God.*” The problem concerns the moral inclinations of the heart, what a person wants.

Cardinal Newman wrote towards the end of his life that of ourselves we are unable to change the fundamental starting points and assumptions of our moral and religious life. We must pray that God will give us the right starting points. Those starting points are moral, and they dispose us to accept the truth. Without them even the truth that is “plain” will not be accepted.



Wednesday of the twenty-eighth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 130 (129):3-4 If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But with you is found forgiveness, O God of Israel.

Collect May your grace, O Lord, we pray, at all times go before us and follow after and make us always determined to carry out good works. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Galatians 5:18-25; Ps. 1; Luke 11:42-46

Jesus said, Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practised the latter without leaving the former undone. Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and greetings in the market places. Woe to you, because you are like unmarked

graves, which men walk over without knowing it. One of the experts in the law answered him, Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also. Jesus replied, And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them. (Luke 11:42-46)

Self-importance I have never delved seriously into the history of empirical psychology as a discipline, but it is clear that over the last several decades the theme of *self-esteem* has attained a considerable prominence. Self-esteem is a term used in psychology to indicate a person's appraisal of his or her own worth. It includes beliefs about oneself, such as "I am competent in this or that," or "I am no good at the job I am doing," and various emotions such as despair, shame, satisfaction or triumph. Importantly, such statements as "I am a bad person, and I feel bad about myself in general," ring alarm bells in the mind of the psychologist. Such a person's "self-esteem" is low, and that is deemed not to be good. In popular discourse, self-

esteem refers to how much you value yourself and how important you think you and your accomplishments are. Now, it is obvious that this is a fairly fundamental matter in the life and happiness of the human being. Any thing has a certain objective importance simply because it exists. Being has value. In the case of the animal, self-esteem will not be possible, of course, because there is no consciousness of self. A dog is conscious of many things including (the friendliness of) its own master or fellow-animals, but is not conscious of itself. That is to say, it has no power of strict self-awareness (which would imply a spiritual self), and so there is no capacity to be aware of its own value. Self-esteem is not possible. But human beings are aware of themselves as distinct entities, and so possess an innate sense of personal value for the simple reason that they are aware that they exist. That which exists has value. Further, the human being senses what is the manifest fact, namely that he is of far greater importance than many other things around him, and of equal importance — in a fundamental sense — to other human beings. Hence it is

to be expected that the human being will have a degree of self-esteem, and will expect that his value as a human being will be acknowledged by others. If this is lacking, it is a disorder and he will feel it. The next plain fact is that all too often this self-worth is not acknowledged. Many will regard him as of little value.

So self-esteem has been an important issue for every individual since the dawn of human history. The trouble is that fallen man tends not only to deny to others the esteem that is their due. He also seeks for himself the esteem of others to a degree entirely disproportionate to his merits, and in ways that are disordered. As a matter of fact, this sort of thing began long before the human race appeared. Splendid and lustrous angels, worthy of the highest esteem because of their endowments received from the Creator, wished to be esteemed with the honour due to God. *I will not serve*, was their cry. Creatures though they knew themselves to be, entirely dependent on the ongoing creative act of God, they nevertheless demanded a position equal to that of God. Their disordered self-esteem was

monstrously wilful and it was their terrible undoing. Thus Lucifer, the bearer of light, became Satan, the prince of darkness. At the dawn of history he was found to be in the Garden tempting the Woman with his characteristic temptation: to be a god like the one God. The crash was terrible, and it left human nature in the sorry state with which we are so familiar. Our self-esteem has been derailed, and we tend to claim for it an overwhelming abundance, and are in constant unhappiness at the portion of it we are served. Self-esteem is indeed a fundamental matter in human flourishing, but the question is, what are its true sources? The most objective esteem we enjoy is not that which we have for ourselves, nor that which comes from our fellow human beings. It is the esteem which God has for us, whom he sustains out of love. The fact is that we are nothing, absolutely nothing without him, and all that we are and have in any positive sense is his gift. We are living proofs of his divine esteem for us, and our self-esteem ought to be derived from the fact of his love for us. It is a love that creates, redeems and sanctifies us. On our

part, what can we show but daily infidelities — but the answer to this is to make constant acts of humility and trust in the merciful love of God which is his pure gift. Our self-esteem is based in him, not in ourselves. No matter how poor we are in ourselves, the rock of our self-esteem lies in God.

In our Gospel passage today, our Lord castigates the Pharisees for making themselves the object of esteem rather than God: *“Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and greetings in the market places. Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which men walk over without knowing it”* (Luke 11:42-46). They were creatures of self-importance. Our Lord said elsewhere that we ought come to him and learn from him, for he is meek and humble of heart, and we shall find rest for our souls (Matthew 11:28-30). We are to choose the lowly place, as our best place before God. More precisely, we are to seek to live in the truth, in this case, the truth of ourselves. We are creatures of God, and he is the Source of all.

Second reflection:

The Judgment There is one element in the Christian life that is truly pivotal. It is repentance. The prophets continually preached repentance and threatened the direst consequences if the people did not repent. Jonah's mission was to call the Ninevites to repentance. They responded to the call and were spared the consequences of their sins. John the Baptist preached repentance, and our Lord began his public ministry by preaching a call to repent, for, he said, the Kingdom of God was at hand. St Paul in his Letter to the Romans solemnly warns the one who stubbornly refuses to repent. The judgment of God is coming. St Paul unambiguously speaks "*that day of anger when his just judgments will be made known. He will repay each one as his works deserve*" (Romans 2:6). God is good, and his goodness is shown in his patience and toleration allowing time for the sinner to repent. What ought we take from these words?

The failure to repent can be a matter of stubbornness. Our Lord time and again (including in the Lord's Prayer) stresses the imperative need to forgive. But do we try to forgive, and from the heart? If we do not, he tells us, we shall not be forgiven. Now, are we facing up to this, or are we secretly refusing to forgive, stubbornly hanging on to grievances? There may be many things, such as almsgiving, or penance, or whatever else we find difficult in the spiritual life and which we are forever refusing to come to terms with. On several fronts, we may be stubbornly, if secretly, refusing to repent.

Now I begin! Let us pray for the spirit of repentance to fill our spiritual life, enabling us to repent from the deliberate venial sins to which we are stubbornly yet secretly attached.



Thursday of the twenty-eighth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 130 (129):3-4 If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But with you is found forgiveness, O God of Israel.

Collect May your grace, O Lord, we pray, at all times go before us and follow after and make us always determined to carry out good works. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ephesians 1:1-10; Ps. 97; Luke 11:47-54

Jesus said to the experts in the law, Woe to you, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your forefathers who killed them. So you testify that you approve of what your forefathers did; they killed the prophets, and you build their tombs. Because of this, God in his wisdom said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute.' Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the

blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all. Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering. When Jesus left there, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to oppose him fiercely and to besiege him with questions, waiting to catch him in something he might say. (Luke 11: 47-54)

Sinful blindness In our Gospel passage, our Lord charges the “lawyers” — and the “Pharisees” were among them (Luke 11: 42-44) — with approving “*of what your forefathers did; they killed the prophets, and you build their tombs.*” Our Lord was saying that their action of building the tombs of the prophets killed by their forefathers was, without their realizing it, symbolic of their being at one with “*the deeds of your forefathers.*” Stephen, just before his martyrdom by stoning, refers to this

tradition of rejection of the prophets: “*Was there any prophet whom your fathers did not persecute? In their day, they put to death those who foretold the coming of the just One*” (Acts 7:52). St Paul, who at the time had approved of Stephen’s stoning, also mentions this. He writes to the Thessalonians: “*For you, brothers, ... also have suffered the same things from your countrymen as they did from the Jews; who both killed the Lord Jesus Christ and their own prophets, and drove us out; they displease God, and oppose everyone*” (1 Thessalonians 2:14-15). These are references to a perceived motif, a received tradition. Jezebel had persecuted the prophet Elijah. In Jeremiah 26, at the end of his withering prophecy in the court of the house of the Lord, Jeremiah was arrested by “*the priests and the prophets*” and was presented to the princes and to the people for capital punishment — but this demand was rejected. Subsequently he suffered much. In the same chapter reference is made to the prophet Uriah the son of Shemaiah (27:20-24) who was killed for what he prophesied. In 2 Chronicles 24: 20-22, Zechariah the son

of Jehoiada the priest received the spirit of prophecy, and prophesied before the people that God was abandoning them. At the king's order he was stoned to death in the Temple of the Lord. In the same inspired Book we are given something of a comment on the history of the reception given to the prophets: *“Early and often did the Lord, the God of their fathers, send his messengers to them, for he had compassion on his people and his dwelling place. But they mocked the messengers of God, despised his warnings, and scoffed at his prophets, until the anger of the Lord against his people was so inflamed that there was no remedy”* (2 Chronicles 36:15-16).

Our Lord was saying that his enemies were part of this manifest tradition. The point is that Christ told them in no uncertain terms that they were culpably blind. They were of the same class as their “forefathers,” though they sanctimoniously maintained and honoured the resting places of the martyred prophets. It is this blindness which we must contemplate. This dialogue between our Lord and the Pharisees and scribes took place, as presented by Luke,

in the house of a Pharisee who had invited him to dine with him. We ought not imagine our Lord as speaking in uncontrolled anger — such is scarcely in accord with his consummate self-control and holy bearing. I imagine our Lord speaking in low tones within the room where all were reclining at table. I imagine him with face manifesting a holy peace, utterly unruffled at the formidable array of personages before him. He was master of the room and all knew it. I even imagine a slight smile as he speaks slowly and clearly, perhaps even slightly shaking his head, as if with a semi-hopeless gaze at the blindness of his audience of Pharisees and scribes. St John tells us in his Gospel that he knew what was in the heart of man (John 2: 25). He knew them all, and they could not touch him unless he allowed it. He spoke with point: “*Woe to you Pharisees!*” he said in quiet and emphatic tone, striking at the heart of all. “*Woe also to you lawyers!*” he continued, turning his sovereign gaze on them. The setting was direct, even somewhat intimate in the sense that it was within the familiar setting of a formal meal. There was no public

embarrassment of the Pharisees before the populace. The Pharisee had invited him and scribes were among the guests. It would seem that the occasion included only our Lord and them — perhaps some of our Lord's disciples were there. Our Lord used the special occasion to be unmistakably clear, and he hoped that his words would penetrate the hardness of their blinded hearts. But it was to no avail. We read that *“When Jesus left there, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to oppose him fiercely and to besiege him with questions, waiting to catch him in something he might say”* (Luke 11: 47-54).

The lesson we must take from the whole incident is that we ought be on guard against a similar blindness and hardness of heart. Let us not say, this cannot happen to me! It probably already is happening to us, to some extent. We probably already suffer from some such moral blindness. We need the grace of God and an opening to the light of the Holy Spirit. That grace is available to us in the word of God and the Sacraments of the Church. Let us make it our business to obtain this grace and to remain in

the state of grace, all the while praying for the light of God to guide us and to keep us from culpable error. “*Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful!*”

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Second reflection: (Luke 11:47-54)

“The scribes and the Pharisees began a furious attack on him”

Our Lord, as we read in today’s Gospel (Luke 11: 47-54), solemnly warned the leaders of the people of the judgment of God that was coming on them: alas for you! he said to them. In response “*the scribes and the Pharisees began a furious attack on him ... setting traps to catch him out in something he might say.*” This opposition from the leaders of the people did not cease to grow, and it culminated in his crucifixion. Our Lord failed to win them over to the truth he proclaimed and bore witness to by the gift of his life. What was the meaning of this failure and the sacrifice it led to? The failure was redemptive. In the mounting

hostility lay the beginnings of a salvific victory. St Paul in his Letter to the Romans tells us that both Jew and pagan are redeemed “*in Christ Jesus who was appointed to sacrifice his life so as to win reconciliation by faith*” (3:25). God, he writes elsewhere, was reconciling the world to himself in Christ’s gift of his life to the witness of the truth. The effect of this sacrifice is the reconciliation of all, Jews and pagans, to God. It is offered to all as a free gift, a grace. How does it come to all? By what means does it reach the individual? It “*comes through faith to everyone, Jew and pagan alike, who believes in Jesus Christ*” (3:22). Our Gospel today shows our Lord’s enemies resolutely refusing to believe in his word, the word of truth. Their response was personal hostility. Salvation comes to us through giving to Jesus our belief in him and in all he reveals. This means, as our Lord says elsewhere, to “*hear the word of God and putting it into practice.*” This is the obedience of faith that is to be preached to all.



Friday of the twenty-eighth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 130 (129):3-4 If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But with you is found forgiveness, O God of Israel.

Collect May your grace, O Lord, we pray, at all times go before us and follow after and make us always determined to carry out good works. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ephesians 1:11-14; Ps. 32; Luke 12:1-7

Meanwhile, when a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples, saying: Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will

be proclaimed from the roofs. I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him. Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. (Luke 12:1-7)

Fear him! In one of his notable sermons on Advent, John Henry Newman preached on Reverence, which he described as a belief in God's presence (December 2, 1838). He states that while we gain but a glimmering of the glory of the Lord here in this life — we see through a glass darkly — nevertheless we “*know in part.*” That is, we have a duty to “realize” the presence of Christ. This is an important theme in the thought of John Henry Newman — he distinguishes between a notional knowledge of something and its realization. One has a realization of it when it is apprehended as a reality. In our

realization of the all-holy God, we are aware of his presence. In this Anglican sermon written at the height of the Oxford Movement, it is reverence, consisting of a species of awe and fear, which is the proper response to God's presence. What is interesting is Newman's comment on "the present day." He writes that "*awe and fear are at the present day all but discarded from religion.*" Indeed, whole societies "*make it almost a first principle to disown the duty of reverence*" — and we as children of the Church "*do not feel the want of it.*" A holy fear of God is something we are ashamed to admit to, and it is ridiculed. Newman is saying that reverence is rejected as a key to human existence. But, Newman asserts, reverence is indeed a key to human existence in this world, and there are, he proposes, two classes of persons who especially lack it. There are those who consider that sin is no great evil in itself, and there are those who think that it is no great evil in them because of their faith. Both views of sin, paradoxically, can spring from viewing God as a God of "love," meaning by this a God who is merely benevolent

and merciful, whatever the creature might do. In this view, God himself does not take sin seriously. So it is that God is commonly regarded without fear. Whatever one may do, God will wink at it for that is the kind of being he is. As we might put it, he is “a good fellow,” and so — if he exists — we should have nothing to worry about from him. As the Oxford Movement gained fame in the 1830s, Newman was visited by some like-minded men of Cambridge. They told him of the religious ethos of many at Cambridge, and Newman remarked to them that what those individuals lacked, and what they needed, was *fear*. He meant that they needed to fear God more.

That was the character of much of religion in Newman’s day, and the situation is still of that order. We are nonchalant about the all-holy and almighty God. Reverence is dismissed. On the other hand, there is in modern secular culture an alternative view of the key human posture in the face of existence. The appropriate attitude is deemed to be dread and anxiety, and there are currents of philosophy which are dominated by this theme.

To all of this, Newman, beatified by Pope Benedict XVI in September 2010, proposes Reverence. Were we to have the sight of God, and of Jesus Christ realized as being God made man, we would experience awe and reverence. We would realize the holiness of God and our own unworthiness. In proportion, then, as we realize and believe that God is present, we shall have similar feelings, and not to have similar feelings of true and profound reverence is an indicator that to that extent we have failed to realize his presence. There is a sense in which we have a duty to feel as if we had seen him — which is to say, to have faith. If it is a sin to be destitute of faith, it is to that extent a sin to be destitute of reverence for God who, we know by faith and reflection, is present to us. Further, the day will come when we shall find ourselves literally and in full sight in the presence of God — and this thought would make anyone afraid who has any sense of who God is. The “fear of God” in Newman’s thought is not an abject terror. It does, indeed, include the feeling of a sinner before his judge. It includes also the feeling of a creature before his

Maker. But it especially involves the filial fear of a child of God before his all-holy and good Father who has sent his Son as our Redeemer. It is fear of offending him who loves us. It involves awe, wonder, thanks and praise — all this is included in the feeling of reverence before the unseen God who is realized as being present. We stand before him who is unseen. All up, one of the key attitudes of human existence is, then, reverence. It is this which ought characterize the basic life of our soul. It is very easy for modern man to lack reverence before reality, and most seriously, before God. If we lack reverence before God, it may indicate that we do not realize that he truly exists and that he utterly transcends every creature.

Godly fear is a duty, Newman taught. Reverence is a sign of authentic belief in the reality and presence of God, and it follows from faith. Scripture abounds in commands to fear the living God. In our Gospel today, our Lord says: *“I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing*

of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.” But, paradoxically, this “fear” of God will lead us not to fear, for “the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows” (Luke 12:1-7).

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Second reflection: Luke 12:1-7.

**Hypocrisy **

Our Lord consistently had harsh words for hypocrites. In today’s Gospel he told the crowds to be on “*guard against the yeast of the Pharisees that is, their hypocrisy*” (Luke 12: 1-7). Hypocrisy is a form of living in falsehood and it is entirely opposed to the spirit of Christ who is the truth. It seeks to project an impression of moral goodness, while the reality within is the contrary of this impression. Our Lord tells the crowds that all that is hidden — the hidden evil that hypocrisy conceals — will be uncovered and made clear in the full light of God’s day.

What then ought we do to overcome hypocritical tendencies within ourselves, the tendency to try to impress others and to gain their moral admiration by projecting a false impression? We must live in the presence of God who sees all, and aim to gain his approval rather than that of men. We must fear displeasing God rather than man, knowing that he alone is the one who matters and who cares for us. He alone has power to bring ultimate and final punishment on us because of our deeds. Our Lord tells his “friends” not to fear those who can cause mere temporal suffering and discomfort. Rather *“fear him who, after he has killed, has the power to cast into hell.”*

Let us constantly remember that God sees all, to the innermost depths of the heart. He, the Reader of our hearts and our heavenly Father, is the one who will be our judge. There is no escaping his judgment. Let us then shun all hypocrisy within us and live in the truth before God and others.



Saturday of the twenty-eighth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Ps 130 (129):3-4 If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But with you is found forgiveness, O God of Israel.

Collect May your grace, O Lord, we pray, at all times go before us and follow after and make us always determined to carry out good works. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ephesians 1:15-23; Psalm 8; Luke 12:8-12

Jesus said, I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God. But he who disowns me before men will be disowned before the angels of God. And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about

how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say. (Luke 12:8-12)

The Holy Spirit As is well known, Islam places Muhammad at the end of a long prophetic tradition beginning from Abraham (indeed, from Adam). Its holy book, the *Koran*, is said by Islam to be the Final Testament. I do not get the impression that the numerous inspired books making up the Hebrew Bible — what the Christian calls the Old Testament — and the books making up the New Testament, especially the Gospels, are used in practice by the Muslim as a source of access to Revelation. Rather, the *Koran* (with its own summaries, comments quotations and interpretations of Old and New Testament events and teachings) is, in practice, all that is used and acknowledged by the Muslim. Virtually, it is seen to be complete in itself. Muslims believe the *Koran* to be verbally revealed by God to Muhammad through the angel Jibril (i.e., Gabriel) gradually over a period of approximately twenty three years beginning in 610 AD,

when Muhammad was forty, and concluding in 632 AD, the year of his death. Muslims further believe that the *Koran* was memorized, recited and exactly written down by Muhammad's companions after each revelation was dictated by him. The present form of the *Koran* text is understood to be the original version compiled by the first Caliph, Abu Bakr. I mention this as a kind of introduction to the contrasting Christian approach — which, of course, does not allow that the *Koran* is among the Inspired Writings, nor that Muhammad is one of the line of Prophets. In Christian teaching, divine Revelation in a public sense was concluded definitively in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is God's Word and contains in himself every heavenly blessing. However, the Christian, steeped in the Gospels and in the New Testament writings, looks lovingly and constantly to the Old Testament also. The Church is always referring to the Revelation that preceded the coming of him in whom dwells the fullness of the godhead bodily. The Church treasures the first glimmers in the Old Testament of what is gradually being revealed there, and

which bursts into full view in the Person and teaching of Jesus Christ. Now, the Person of the Spirit of God, to whom our Lord refers in today's Gospel, is a case in point.

The idea of the Spirit of God is not, I think, found in Hellenist thought — it is a biblical theme. The “spirit of God” (or “wind,” “breath”) meets us in the opening verses of the Old Testament (Genesis 1:2), just as it does in the first chapter of the Gospel of Matthew (1: 18). It is, then, no more a startling novelty for the author of Genesis, than it is for Matthew. But of course, while it is common to both Testaments, the number of references to the “Spirit of God” in the New surpasses its presence in the Old. The point here, though, is that there is a manifest continuity between the two. Jesus Christ and the writers of the New Testament speak of the “Holy Spirit” as a divine Person and they identify the “Holy Spirit” with the “Spirit of God” of the older books — which they, especially Christ himself, venerate so highly. The doctrine that God revealed himself gradually and progressively to his chosen people over the course of history is assumed and

appreciated, and it is endorsed by Christ himself in his constant references to the Scriptures. He is their Fulfilment and their Interpretation, while far surpassing the mere letter of those Inspired Writings. So it is that the Church takes the Hebrew Scriptures very seriously, and looks to them for a fuller appreciation of what the Saviour later revealed. So, when our Lord refers to the “Holy Spirit” (as in today’s Gospel), let us in our minds set his teaching within the context of the whole sweep of divine Revelation — though this is not something we have the space to develop here. In our Gospel today our Lord refers to the Holy Spirit with the utmost love and reverence. The enormity of an offence against the Holy Spirit is stressed — indeed to the point of his declaring that *“anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.”* Just what our Lord is referring to here has been variously discussed, but it puts us on guard to have a profound reverence for the divine Person of the Holy Spirit. Our Lord also tells us that the Holy Spirit will be the greatest Support for the Christian in his mission: *“When you are brought before synagogues,*

rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say” (Luke 12: 8-12).

Let us resolve to *love* the Holy Spirit, as does Jesus our Saviour himself. The Holy Spirit is God, the same one God that the Father is, and that the Son our Lord is. He is a distinct and living Person, a divine Person that is other than the Father and the Son, the Self who proceeds from the Father and the Son as their mutual Love. His divine being is their divine being, which is the one and only God. He, the third divine Person is the one God, as is the Father and the Son — and his mission is to sanctify the Church and each of the Church’s children, and through the ministry of the Church with Christ her head, to sanctify the world. Let us entrust ourselves to him, then, and be led by him.

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Second reflection:

Faith St Paul teaches us that Abraham is the father of all those who belong to his faith. He is our father in the eyes of God, in whom he put his faith (Romans 4). Our salvation and sanctification depend on God and his active mercy, and not on us. Faith recognises this and relies on God and his mercy totally, despite all. Despite the odds, God can sanctify. This enlivens hope and makes it undying. The temptation will be over the course of life to think that our personal sanctification is impossible not only to our weak selves, but also to God. It involves a temptation to think that God is not the God that Revelation — the Revelation of Abraham our father in faith — proclaims. There is no doubt that personal sanctity, the sanctification of the mind and the heart after the likeness of Christ, will seem to be impossible. Our Lord himself alluded to this on one occasion when he said to his disciples, *“To man it is impossible, but not to God.”* We are called to believe and hope in the power of God and his grace, whatever be the apparent odds.

Every day as we begin again the work of doing God's will in the midst of the ordinariness of daily life, let us resolve to have faith. This is faith not in ourselves but in the power of God who desires to transform us into the image of his Son. In this faith, and with the grace given to us in the life of the Church, we actively give our wholehearted co-operation, never giving up on God.



Twenty-ninth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16):6, 8 To you I call; for you will surely heed me, O God; turn your ear to me; hear my words. Guard me as the apple of your eye; in the shadow of your wings protect me.

Collect Almighty ever living God, grant that we may always conform our will to yours and serve your majesty in sincerity of heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Isaiah 45:1.4-6; Psalm 95;
1 Thessalonians 1:1-5; Matthew 22:15-21

Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap Jesus in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. Teacher, they said, we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then,

what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not? But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax. They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription? Caesar's, they replied. Then he said to them, Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's (Matthew 22:15-21).

God and Caesar In our Gospel passage today, our Lord answers with ease the trap set by the Pharisees and the Herodians. His answer addresses a daily dimension of the life of human beings: “*Render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God.*” (Matthew 22: 15-21). By God's plan we live in a world in which various agents of authority necessarily bear on and govern our actions. There cannot be a functioning society without authority. Therefore, God wants us to respect legitimate authority because in the nature of the case this is manifestly the will of him who is the Creator and Sustainer of all societies. Christ's directive, “*Render to Caesar what*

belongs to Caesar,” expresses this fact, but now as coming from the lips of the incarnate God himself. So not only is this the dictate of reason. God has declared in Jesus Christ that it is part of our duty to God that we fulfil our responsibilities to society — and by divine disposition, society could not work without the exercise of authority and without respect for it. We go to work each day, and this involves working in some sense under an authority to which we must answer. Citizens answer to Governments, but, as the uprisings of the Middle East and north Africa during 2011 indicated, even Islamic dictatorships will eventually answer to their citizenry. If we have our own commercial business, we must answer to society’s regulations. If we are a company director, we must answer not only to the law but to shareholders. If we exercise a profession, there are social regulations and laws that are to be observed. If we are an employee, we answer to our employer. The Christian has it from Christ that we are to *render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s*, meaning that we are to respect legitimate human authority and its

claims upon us. How do we best do this? We do this precisely by recognising and accepting that legitimate civil and social authority comes ultimately from God. We must learn to find God in daily life and serve him there, including in our obedience to the legitimate authority which every day is exercised over us in social, economic and political life.

Every time we are called upon to do this — and the occasions are numerous — it is an occasion for union with God, even if the one exercising legitimate authority is himself irreligious, atheistic, or personally immoral. Genuine religion essentially involves obedience to the authority of God. Tests will come, and they will be the moments to remember our Lord in the presence of Pontius Pilate, the pagan civil governor. Our Lord said that any authority that Pilate had, came to him from above. It was his heavenly Father that our Lord was obeying when he accepted the authority of Pilate unto death, despite Pilate's unworthiness and injustice. We must learn to recognise God, not in the person of Caesar, but in the lawful

authority he legitimately exercises — even if we find ourselves repeatedly disagreeing with how well that authority is exercised. Of course, if authority is exercised illegitimately and goes against the law of God, we cannot obey it even if it means suffering — even death if need be, as the martyrs show us. On such occasions we render to God what belongs to God, bearing witness to the vocation of society to do the same. So the Christian must render to Caesar what belongs lawfully to Caesar, and serve God in doing precisely this. At the same time, he has the vocation to render to God the things that belong to God. Not only is this the vocation of the individual Christian, but it is the vocation of society itself. What is it that belongs to God? Everything belongs to God. Everything we do individually and as a society ought be done according to the law of God and out of love for him. This is a wide field, and to treat it properly is beyond the scope of our reflection here. But there is one aspect of this which is very relevant to the situation of society today and which we ought think of deeply. It concerns the secular character of society. Man,

and therefore society, is obliged to acknowledge God as the Lord of all. Now, God is scarcely acknowledged in a professedly secular culture such as ours. God is regarded as a private notion. He is relegated to the status of being no more than a personal opinion. As such he is regarded as bearing on the private life of the religious individual and his own affairs, but not on society in general and in a public sense. Publicly, God is absent, even non-existent.

In this situation, the lay member of Christ's faithful, whose mission in life is to live and work in the secular world, must bear witness to the authority of God in all aspects of the world's life, whether public or private. It means living one's life in a way that is consistent with the Catholic Faith, and striving to help both individuals and society at large to accept God as an objective reality, with public and private claims on our common, social obedience. The lay member of the Church has the mission to help society, and to help those exercising authority, to render to God what is God's, even if there is uncertainty as to what really belongs, objectively, to God. This is a

tremendous task, but essential to the work of the laity, and of inestimable benefit to the world.

Further Reading: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: no. 2234-2246 (Authority in civil society).



Monday of the twenty-ninth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16):6, 8 To you I call; for you will surely heed me, O God; turn your ear to me; hear my words. Guard me as the apple of your eye; in the shadow of your wings protect me.

Collect Almighty ever living God, grant that we may always conform our will to yours and serve your majesty in sincerity of heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ephesians 2:1-10; Ps. 99; Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me. Jesus replied, Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you? Then he said to them, Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions. And he told them this parable: The ground of a certain rich man produced a

good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich towards God. (Luke 12: 13-21)

Greed In an interview conducted by Phil Donahue in 1979, the well-known economist Milton Friedman spoke on the role of greed and virtue in the development of society. Donahue put to Friedman that in the face of the widespread mal-distribution of wealth and the desperate plight of underdeveloped countries, ought not capitalism be seriously questioned as a proper driving force of society's economic life? That is, Donahue added (as if it were an explanation of capitalism), ought not greed be

rejected as the fuel of economic life? Friedman answered, “Well, first of all, tell me — is there some society you know that does not run on greed? You think that Russia doesn’t run on greed? You think that China doesn’t run on greed? What is greed? The world runs on individuals pursuing their separate endeavours. The great achievements of civilization have not come from government bureaus.” Friedman went on to say that governments do not reward virtue but usefulness. Self-interest drives the whole of society. Now, of course, Friedman does not here define the precise meaning of his term, “greed.” Doubtless he was using the word in the sense of self-interest as opposed to external (as in government) direction. Of course, properly understood, self-interest is indeed a fundamental principle of human life. It is for legitimate “self-interest” that we work for our living. But by “greed” we usually mean that self-interest which cares little for our neighbour — and, sadly, what Friedman says of the life of society being driven by “greed” seems to any observer, to a point all too true. If

there are not laws regulating self-interest, society will be driven by greed. But Friedman appears to be saying that while “greed” may not be a good thing in itself, it is a fact of life. It gets society up and running and in the business of economic improvement. So, run with it, encourage it, and regulate it if you will, but recognize that it is operating everywhere, including within socialist regimes. The only question is, what is the best system for “greed” to achieve its best overall social results — and Friedman champions the capitalist system. So, basically greed is good.

One of the points John Henry Newman made about human thought is that one’s first principles are of decisive importance for the positions that people take up. The logic of two persons may be equally good, but they may be of utterly divergent views. This will be so because of the divergent starting points of their thought, their basic differences in fundamental assumptions. Perhaps we could put it this way: the basic image, concept or value for which a person opts will govern the working out of his thought. If one allows that “greed” is, well, a mixed blessing in

moral terms but very useful for economic development and so in effect a good thing, that basic idea will shape one's system of thought. But if, starting with a different image, concept or value, one opts for that first principle and then determines to allow it to shape one's system of thought, then obviously it will have very different practical implications. I once knew an academic teaching at Sydney University's department of social studies. In his research he strove to make the image of the Good Samaritan in Christ's parable the basis and centre of his intellectual system. At the time I knew him he was preparing to begin doctoral work, and this image was going to be at the heart of his research. During the latter years of the first decade of the twenty-first century there was a very serious economic upheaval across the globe. Pope Benedict XVI had something to say about this, and it appeared not only in his addresses but in his first Encyclical. He said that at root, moral principles were involved in this upheaval — and indeed, that “greed” had been a significant factor. All of this brings us to our Gospel passage today, in which our

Lord warns us about greed: *“Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me. Jesus replied, Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you? Then he said to them, Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions”* (Luke 12: 13-21). I have seen documentaries of businessmen who have resolved to build their commercial careers not on greed, but on Christ-like service. Their perspective was very different from that of Milton Friedman. They have resolved to plant Christ and his teaching on love at the centre of their business activity.

Our Lord tells us once again — as he does repeatedly in other parts of the Gospels — that we must bear in mind the Last Things we shall all face, and which mankind as a whole will face. I refer to the judgment of God. *“God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich towards*

God” (Luke 12: 13-21). Let this be what drives not only our private lives, but the life of society — as influenced by our witness.

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Second reflection

God’s promises One of the striking features of some Protestant communions has been their emphasis on the Old Testament, at least in terms of popular preaching and private devotion. By contrast, many Catholics who have the fullness of the truth of the Scriptures available to them have looked too little to the Old Testament, and have failed to gain the inspiration and spiritual nourishment which — in the light of the Gospels, the New Testament and the Church’s teaching — is there for them. Our Lord himself constantly referred to the Old Testament. So does St Paul in his Letter to the Romans. For instance, he refers to Abraham (Romans 4), and what he says about this great religious figure ought inspire us to read more about him in the book of Genesis. Abraham’s great feature, as St Paul

instructs us, was his faith “*that God had the power to do what he had promised.*” It was this faith that made him so pleasing in the sight of God and led him to be so steadfast in doing God’s will. God had declared to him his saving plan, a plan that promised great blessings, a plan that was realizable not by Abraham himself of course, but by God and God alone. But it required Abraham’s active cooperation, and this he gave, inspired by the hope that was based on his faith in God’s word. Mary the mother of Jesus was the woman of faith *par excellence*, and in this she towered above her heroic ancestor, Abraham. Now, what aspect of God’s plan ought be the daily object of our faith and hope? St Paul writes in one of his letters, “*This is the will of God, your sanctification.*” That is the great promise for each of us and the blessing ahead, provided we cooperate with God’s plan. But we must, like Abraham, *believe* that God has the power to do what he has promised. He can make us saints — but God wants us to *believe* this. Let us pray for this faith and exercise it daily.



Tuesday of the twenty-ninth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16):6, 8 To you I call; for you will surely heed me, O God; turn your ear to me; hear my words. Guard me as the apple of your eye; in the shadow of your wings protect me.

Collect Almighty ever living God, grant that we may always conform our will to yours and serve your majesty in sincerity of heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ephesians 2:12-22; Psalm 84;

Luke 12:35-38

Jesus said, "Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. Truly I tell you, he will dress

himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the middle of the night or toward daybreak.” (Luke 12:35-38)

Being ready There are many obvious things about ourselves and the world of which we are part. For instance, the world, and ourselves too, are subject to continual *change*. *Causation* is everywhere. There is *order* and structure — all is not mere chaos. Most especially, things are transient and *contingent*. Nothing about us and around us is necessary. Our life and our existence is essentially vulnerable. The small bird is suddenly attacked by the household cat and within minutes is destroyed and consumed by the attacker. Millions of years ago dinosaurs roamed the earth. One theory, suggested by the presence of the world-wide sediment layer of the K-Pg boundary clay in marine and terrestrial rocks, which shows metal iridium (abundant in asteroids), is that there was a crash to the earth of a giant asteroid. This, the hypothesis goes, caused catastrophic disturbances

to the environment and included the extinction of the dinosaurs. Doubtless other factors contributed to their extinction. The point being made here, though, is that all things in the universe are vulnerable to destruction, radical change and, when it comes to life, extinction. It is the most obvious fact about the life of man: inevitably he will be overtaken by death. He cannot avoid it. Just as once he did not exist and live, so in due course he will cease to exist as the living and *physical* person he is. He was born, and he will die, and so he is in *no way necessary*. He could die at any minute, if not because of some external attack, at least by some internal disorder. He could die this very day, or tomorrow, or in a year's time, or in many years' time, but eventually he will most certainly die. Usually he has no idea when he will die. Some may know when they will die — a condemned criminal may, as may a person in the terminal stage of his illness. Normally, though, he does not know this. Life is uncertain and death is ever approaching. When it will arrive, as arrive it assuredly will, is known to no one but God the creator and sustainer of all. The

question is: what then, after death? The imagination of the peoples, as represented in their religious myths, is hazy on the point. Generally it is accepted there is an Afterlife, and often it is thought that there is some form of a Judgment.

So then, there is Death and its all-important aftermath. To have any clear ideas on the matter, we must turn to Revelation. What Revelation tells us is that the most significant thing about our inevitable death is that it marks the coming of God to us. In fact, this is one of the most significant teachings of Revealed Religion. God is not a distant deity, in some far-away abode beyond the clouds, scarcely hearing the pleas of his creatures and leaving it to them to turn to other more accessible deities or forces. Though the chasm between himself and his creation is unbridgeable from our point of view because of his infinite transcendence, it is eminently and instantly bridgeable from his side. That is to say, the transcendent God sustains everything with the touch of his finger, as it were. He who transcends all is unimaginably imminent. Now the significant thing about God as he has revealed himself to

man is that he is the God who has come, who is ever coming, and who will come. He does not abandon us to our own sinful selves. He takes the initiative in his mercy, and he comes to his stricken and impoverished creation — stricken and impoverished especially because of the sin of man. God is not a distant God but a God who comes. He comes to save, but he is a holy God, and he expects repentance and the desire to do his holy will. He came to Abraham and revealed his choice and his promises. He came to Isaac and Jacob and to the Patriarchs, to Moses, to the Judges, to the Prophets and to his chosen people. Finally he came in his own divine Son, and his Son redeemed the world from the power of sin and opened the gates of heaven to us all, if we but repent and believe in him. He came, and he ever comes to us in his grace, given to us through the ministry of the Church his body. All this brings us to our Gospel today (Luke 12: 35-38), in which our Lord warns us all of the coming of the Master. He will come to save and to judge, so we must be ready for his coming. *“Be dressed ready for service and keep your*

lamps burning, like servants waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes.”

How would we stand, were this very day to be our last — which is to say, were Jesus Christ to come this very day, the day when our earthly sojourn were to end? Let us so live each day that were the Master to come he would find us ready at his service. Being at the service of the Master means being given over to his will for love of him, and having renounced all that is not in accord with his will. If we are to do this, if we are to live in such a way as always to be ready, it will mean planning accordingly. It means having a plan of life such that the days are not wasted, but given over to the one thing necessary.



Wednesday of the twenty-ninth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16):6, 8 To you I call; for you will surely heed me, O God; turn your ear to me; hear my words. Guard me as the apple of your eye; in the shadow of your wings protect me.

Collect Almighty ever living God, grant that we may always conform our will to yours and serve your majesty in sincerity of heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ephesians 3:2-12; (Psalm:) Isaiah 32;
Luke 12:39-48

Jesus said, Understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. Peter asked, Lord, are you telling this parable to us, or to everyone? The Lord answered, Who

then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But suppose the servant says to himself, 'My master is taking a long time in coming,' and he then begins to beat the menservants and maidservants and to eat and drink and get drunk. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers. That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked. (Luke 12:39-48)

The Judgment It is recognized that the English philosopher, Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftsbury (1671-1713), was a considerable influence on 18th century thought in Britain, France and Germany. He was part of an important circle of English freethinkers, and he influenced French deists such as Voltaire and Rousseau, while also corresponding with Locke, Leibniz and Bayle. Especially important was Shaftsbury's notion of the moral sense. He was insistent that moral goodness is like beauty. Further, he wished the moral agent to be attracted to virtue for its own sake, and not merely out of self-interest. Accordingly, one of the things Shaftsbury was especially critical of was the motive of the fear of punishment in the leading of a virtuous life — which is to say, the fear of the judgment of God. He wrote that this, in effect, was to lead a moral life out of self-interest. Nearly a century and a half after Shaftsbury's death, John Henry Newman was writing his *Idea of a University* (Discourse VIII, no.7), and he referred to elements of Shaftsbury's thought to illustrate his points about conscience as a foundation of religion. In his

Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times (1711), Shaftsbury reduces virtue, Newman writes, to a form of beauty. This means that it is taste and not conscience which determines what is virtuous. At times Shaftsbury formally gives the superiority to taste over conscience: “After all,” Shaftsbury writes, “tis not merely what we call principle, but taste, which governs men.” Newman’s point is that by eliminating the fear of (God’s) punishment from the moral life, Shaftsbury put God out of the moral life and eliminated “morality” as such. A sense of the judgment of God is very important for the preservation of the moral sense and for the pursuit of a moral course. When all is said and done, the simple truth of the judgment of God is momentarily important for the moral life of the individual and of society. As a matter of fact, when we turn to Revealed Religion we see that the judgment of God pervades all its pages. God wants man to act morally, and he threatens judgment and punishment if he does not.

I do not mean that it is the judgment of God *after* death which is *always* in evidence in Holy Writ, for in the

Old Testament more often than not it is God's judgment as expressed in the events of *this* life which is in special evidence. This is not the case in the Gospels. In the teaching of Jesus Christ, the judgment of God after death and at the end of time receives frequent and emphatic stress — and our Gospel today is one such instance. This fact alone, the fact of divine revelation featuring the judgment of God so often, and especially in the Gospels, ought illustrate how important this is for the moral life. A parallel may be seen in the sanctions of society — how often would the rules of the road be observed were it not for the sanctions involved? In our Gospel today, as ever our Lord makes use of a parable. First of all he asks, “*Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions.*” All that we have and all that we are, comes from God and belongs to him — he can withdraw it if ever

and whenever he pleases. Our task is to be a “*faithful and wise manager*” of the responsibilities he has given us in life. If we are this, then a great reward will be ours: “*he will put him in charge of all his possessions.*” But our Lord gives even more emphasis to the wicked and neglectful servant, and to what is coming to him. “*But suppose the servant says to himself, ‘My master is taking a long time in coming,’ and he then begins to beat the menservants and maidservants and to eat and drink and get drunk. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers*” (Luke 12: 39-48). The Judgment of God! There can never be anything like it! How odd and how foolish to be nonchalant in respect to it, for it will dwarf all the tests of this life and will bring to light everything we have done, thought, willed or said. We must be ever ready, for we know not the hour when our Master will come. How wise it is, so to live as if the present day were to be our last.

There is a prayer commonly said at the end of each decade of the Rosary, after the *Glory be to the Father* prayer. It is said to be the prayer taught by the Blessed Virgin Mary to the children at Fatima. Notice the prominence of the judgment of God: “*O my Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of Hell, and bring all souls to Heaven, especially those most in need of your mercy.*” Every day passes quickly. Where do our days lead us to? They lead us to the end of life, and after the end comes the Judgment of God on all we have done. Let us resolve to be ready.

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Second reflection:

Sin One of the truly notable features of our Western culture and civilization is its attitude to *sin*. Classically, and due to the influence of Judaeo-Christian religious thought, the realization of *sin* had been deeply embedded in our Western thought, perhaps more so than in the other systems of thought in the world. But this great gain has been radically weakened over the past few centuries. Gradually the realization of the objective reality of sin has been eroded. In a public sense, sin has been cast into oblivion. It is out of sight, and so out of mind. In philosophical thought it has been relegated to the status of a subjective fixation. So from the Western mind there has spawned systems of thought (secularism, communism, etc.) that banish sin from the human project. The result is that sin has a clear run, for it is not combated. Against this, St Paul in his Letter to the Romans states: “*You must not let sin reign in your mortal bodies or command your obedience to bodily passions*” (Romans 6). Our war against sin is the war of our life, and it is to be meticulous

and unrelenting: *“you must not let any part of your body turn into an unholy weapon fighting on the side of sin.”*

We must take up the work of combating sin in all its detail, especially deliberate venial sin. It will be impossible to attain holiness of life if we are not recognising deliberate venial sin, obtaining God’s pardon for it, and turning away from it. Our fight against sin has to be in earnest. Every day let us renew our baptismal promise to renounce sin and to live in Christ and his teaching.



Thursday of the twenty-ninth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16):6, 8 To you I call; for you will surely heed me, O God; turn your ear to me; hear my words. Guard me as the apple of your eye; in the shadow of your wings protect me.

Collect Almighty ever living God, grant that we may always conform our will to yours and serve your majesty in sincerity of heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ephesians 3:14-21; Psalm 32;

Luke 12:49-53

Jesus said, I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed! Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two

against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother in law against daughter in law and daughter in law against mother in law. (Luke 12:49-53)

Division The natural thing is that an infant will love his parent because he has experienced the love of his parent for him. It is instinctive on the part of the parent to love his or her child, and it is instinctive for the child to love his or her parent in return. As the child grows, normally the love between the two will grow, but of course this dynamic can complicate. It is not impossible for there to be a souring of this love and, indeed, an end to it. This may be due to the emerging selfishness of the child, or of the parent, or of both, or for various other circumstantial reasons. But the more natural thing is that the mutual love that begins in the infancy of the child grows and remains during life and easily survives various upsets in the relationship. It could be said that it generally faces better prospects than, say, the love between man and wife. After all, while the parent-child relationship has grown from the

infancy of the child, the love between husband and wife begins in early adulthood when a new beginning and serious adjustments have to be made by each. Much work lies ahead as each enters into the life of the other. I refer to all this by way of introduction to the relationship between creation as embodied in man, and the Creator. Creation, and man in particular, is the “child” of God — God is the Father of all that is, seen and unseen. Moreover, God did not merely create things as in a single act — analogous to the begetting of a child by the parents — but he sustains all things in their allotted span of time, moment by moment. In referring to the Creator, I refer to the triune God who has been revealed to us not only in his creation, but above all in Jesus Christ the Son of God made man. God is the Father of all, and he creates and sustains all things out of love. The natural thing, then, is for creation and in particular man to respond in love to this ineffable and wondrous Father of all that is. What we would *expect* to see is a world in harmony with the loving God on whom it constantly depends. The natural thing would be to love

God. But what do we see? We see some love certainly, but also a lot of indifference and open rebellion. It is, we might say ironically, the strangest thing in the world.

In the Prologue of the Gospel of St John, we are given a panoramic view of the Incarnation. “*In the beginning*” — reminding us of the creation account of the first chapter of Genesis — “*was the Word.*” That Word had featured in Genesis when God spoke and created the world. John tells us that “*the Word was with God and the Word was God*” — and that “*all things came into being through him.*” Despite the fact that “*He was in the world and the world came into being through him*” — despite this — “the world did not know him.” This, as I said, is the strangest of things. “*He came to what was his own, and his own did not accept him*” (John 1: 1-11). “*The Word was made flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14). From our Lord’s arrival — from his first days in Bethlehem, no less — he received not only a welcome, but fierce opposition. As a harbinger of Christ’s life and death,

Herod sought to kill him. But by the time the king's henchmen had descended on Bethlehem for their catch, the eagle had flown. Holy Simeon had predicted that the Child would be a sign of tremendous contradiction, and once the public ministry commenced the prophecy was seen to be in fulfilment. Slowly but inexorably, with Satan working hard, the net encircled the Messiah. They did not know it, but Christ knew that the events they were orchestrating in such hateful opposition were all according to the divine plan of redemption. The mission of the Messiah would be fulfilled precisely in and through their lethal opposition. And opposition it certainly was, a great swell of opposition to the God who was present in the flesh among them. It is the strangest of things! All this brings us to our Gospel today in which our Lord predicts opposition and contestation over his Person and message: *“Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son*

against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother in law against daughter in law and daughter in law against mother in law” (Luke 12: 49-53).

That is to say, God in Jesus Christ will attract not only love but unyielding opposition. A similar case: It is announced that the Pope will visit England, and immediately a fierce opposition begins to mount amid the love with which the news is received. This is because of what the Pope stands for — he stands for God and for Jesus Christ, the revelation of God. Again, it is announced that the Pope will visit Germany, and immediately 100 members of the German parliament announce they will not attend the Pope’s address to that parliament. This is because of what the Pope stands for — the Person and law of Jesus Christ. Let us never be dismayed at the opposition which Christian witness attracts — it is all, as we would say colloquially, “par for the course.” As with Jesus, so with us who are his disciples.

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Second reflection:

The choices An enormous difference is made to life if there is clarity of vision. If one is driving a car in plenty of traffic there may be catastrophic consequences if one does not have a clear vision of what is ahead, and of the consequences of making certain choices. We all know this, and one of the signs of immaturity and inexperience is the lack of appreciation of this fact. A youthful and inexperienced driver may take no heed of the danger in speeding when somewhat drunk. He has no clarity of vision — he does not see the consequences of his choices. In his Letter to the Romans, St Paul puts before us very clearly the consequences of certain basic choices in life. The options, to one degree or another, are these: putting yourself at “*the service of vice and immorality*,” or putting yourself “*at the service of your sanctification*” (Romans 6). Every day we will be caught up in one or the other of these two choices: God or sin. Whatever route we follow will be our own responsibility. But whatever it is, there will be consequences. So it is of the utmost importance that we

have clarity of vision as to what the choices are and the consequences of those choices. Too few people attain clarity of vision in respect to this fundamental and pivotal issue. The choice made by our first parents for sin rather than for God had consequences far beyond their own personal lives. Christ, the new Adam, engaged in the drama of making all things new by his choices, expressed above all in his Passion and Death.

As a result of being placed in Christ at our baptism, we must make life-giving choices, renewed daily in all our inner and outer activity. Let us then renounce sin, especially all deliberate venial sin and daily repent of it, choosing instead to live in Christ. Let us live out this daily choice in our work and in every aspect of life in which the providence of God has placed us.



Friday of the twenty-ninth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16):6, 8 To you I call; for you will surely heed me, O God; turn your ear to me; hear my words. Guard me as the apple of your eye; in the shadow of your wings protect me.

Collect Almighty ever living God, grant that we may always conform our will to yours and serve your majesty in sincerity of heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ephesians 4:1-6; Psalm 23; Luke 12:54-59

Jesus said to the crowd: When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'It's going to rain,' and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, 'It's going to be hot,' and it is. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time? Why don't you judge for yourselves what is right? As you are going

with your adversary to the magistrate, try hard to be reconciled to him on the way, or he may drag you off to the judge, and the judge turn you over to the officer, and the officer throw you into prison. I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny. (Luke 12:54-59)

Recognizing the time The fact of profound divergence in opinion among men is a fascinating and intriguing phenomenon. Man knows reality instinctively. That is, he has an instinctive knowledge of what is objective to himself, and knows it precisely as being an objective reality. Human knowledge is a wondrous fact, and in a critical sense it surpasses the awareness possessed by the animal. The animal is aware of things, and this awareness is not merely an “impression” experienced by it. You strike a surface — and an impression is left upon that surface. Of course, awareness does include an impression being left upon the conscious subject — there is, for instance, an impression on the retina of the eye, and an impression made upon certain brain cells, an impression on the memory, and so forth. The term “impression,” though,

does not adequately describe “awareness,” for an impression can be made on something with no power of awareness. Awareness involves a form of conscious apprehension or embrace by the subject of what is outside it. The animal, in its own way, instinctively apprehends or embraces, in a form of awareness, what is outside of it. But it is not aware of it precisely as an objective thing with its own existence. In fact, it is not aware of anything, including itself, precisely as endowed with objective reality or existence. But man is instinctively aware of things, including his own self, precisely as objective realities — as existents in their own right. We could say that this is the first thing about the world that man is instinctively aware of, namely its very reality. He struggles to know more and more of the nature of things, but the recognition of their reality is instinctive to him. The animal never attains this. I do not mean here to be discussing the epistemology of human beings. I merely wish to introduce the amazing fact of man’s power to know objective reality instinctively, and gradually with talent and industry to know also a good deal

of its nature. Now, to return to the original observation, the fact is that human thought is marked by profound divergences in opinion among men. We all commonly know reality, but our views of it are profoundly at variance. An observer of the human race might find this deeply curious. Putting it differently, it is striking how great the scale of error and misjudgement marks the life of man.

Truth and error! Man's entire existence and his flourishing depend on his awareness, possession, acceptance and embrace of the truth of things. He is made to find happiness by living in the truth. He is dimly aware of this — and it is confirmed by the experience of life. But so very often he chooses the path of error and rejects the truth. All too often he wants what is wrong, and so very often he rebels against the truth. There is something askew at the heart of his mind, or more precisely at the heart of his will — for it is his will which is seen to be shaping the preferences and judgments of his mind. This disorder in what he wants affects his religious understanding. All of this brings us to the question posed by our Lord in our

Gospel passage today: “*Jesus said to the crowd: When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, ‘It’s going to rain,’ and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, ‘It’s going to be hot,’ and it is. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don’t know how to interpret this present time?*” (Luke 12:54-59). We can know the drift of things to come when we assess the weather: we can see it is going to rain. We can too, by experience and careful observation, predict that we are heading for hot weather. Our powers of knowing and judging are good in areas of physical fact because this does not bear greatly on our moral Self. But when it comes to matters *moral and spiritual*, what is especially decisive is the disposition of our *will*. Our Lord is pointing to the inner choice of good or evil, to the readiness or unwillingness to obey God and his holy will. As St John writes in the Prologue of his Gospel, “*He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not*

accept him” (John 1: 10-11). As St Luke writes when describing the intervention of holy Simeon: “*This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the thoughts of many will be revealed*” (Luke 2: 34-35). The inner thoughts of man are revealed when he encounters Jesus Christ. He is shown to be unwilling and therefore unable to “*interpret this present time,*” the time of Jesus Christ. Let us ask God for his grace so to dispose our inner selves that we shall be able to “*interpret this present time*” when Jesus Christ comes to us in the life and witness of his body the Church. Let us resolve to recognize him as the Lord of all, bringing to us the words of life, words that set us on the path to sanctity, and the grace to live in him. We need to be created anew, and this is the blessing, the good news of God’s wondrous grace. By baptism we have become new creatures, and the promise of his grace enables us to remain in Christ and attain the perfection to which God has called us.

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Second reflection:

Grace If we are ever to get anywhere in the spiritual life we shall have to understand what we are up against. Our Lord on one occasion told the parable of the king going out to fight against another king. He first sat down to consider his own forces and to compare them with those of the other king. We have to gain a good understanding of what we are up against, and consider what are our truest and best weapons. Our situation is that there is — and the person intent on doing good needs to realize this — a war going on within him. By nature we are born as prisoners of sin, a condition handed on to us as a result of the victory of sin in our first parents. Our condition is a fallen and “wretched” one. This must be clearly recognised. The remedy must also be clearly recognised, and it is at hand. It is the person of Jesus Christ who by his grace rescues us from a condition that will bring us death. We then must constantly take the means that will bring us Christ and his grace. These means

are his word and his Sacraments brought to us by his body the Church.

By the grace of Christ we can combat and overcome the law of sin that battles within us. By this grace we can live the law of God. Let us then live this great message of God's grace, this Good News, and bring it with joy and conviction to others.



Saturday of the twenty-ninth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 17 (16):6, 8 To you I call; for you will surely heed me, O God; turn your ear to me; hear my words. Guard me as the apple of your eye; in the shadow of your wings protect me.

Collect Almighty ever living God, grant that we may always conform our will to yours and serve your majesty in sincerity of heart. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ephesians 4:7-16; Psalm 121; Luke 13:1-9

Now there were some present on that very occasion who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them-

do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Then he told this parable: A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' 'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig round it and fertilise it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.' (Luke 13:1-9)

Suffering The very best of men have had an enormous problem with the fact of evil and suffering. It is not just a complaint by people who would have been atheists anyway. Famously, John Henry Newman declared in his *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (1864) that were it not for the unassailable conviction of the existence of God coming to him from the testimony of his conscience, he would have been an atheist or agnostic of any one of a number of varieties. The problem, he said, was the fact of evil and

suffering. In May, 2011 there was a debate in Australia between Peter Singer, the Australian Harvard professor of Philosophy, and Oxford's John Lennox. Years ago I saw a brief interview with Singer and he had said that if God had existed he would have done a better job of the world. This time it was the same in his encounter with Lennox. Singer's big question was about God's apparent unconcern for the suffering, to which Lennox graciously replied that he didn't have a neat answer. But, he said, rather than being distant from human suffering, God entered into it on the cross. This discussion is endless, and has been going on for ages, and will continue to do so. I would suggest that the theist ought assume the sincerity of the atheist or agnostic when he argues from the point of evil and suffering, and that the atheist ought assume that there might be a far larger answer to the matter than he, the atheist, has ever dreamed of. Let the atheist read the Book of Job, coming from before Plato or Aristotle, especially the last chapters. The best approach, I believe, is not to look to philosophers for the last word, but to those whom

history counts to have been close to God and who themselves have suffered enormously. In this respect, who can compare with Jesus Christ? Of course, when we refer to Jesus Christ, we do so considering him as part of, and as the summit of, a history of God's revelation to his people. That is to say, granted the conundrum of the problem of evil, let us look around for light on the problem *from God himself*, from his revelation, as mediated to us through the prophets, and in particular through the One who surpassed them all, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God made man. Let us, then, paint a few broad strokes. The first thing to be said is that Evil and Suffering, as we now know it and as leading to death, was not the lot of man at the beginning. God placed man in a Garden, and toil, suffering and death came to him only after he had separated from God through sin.

That said, let us pass over the presentation of sin, suffering and death in the Old Testament, and recall St Paul's brief words summing up the matter. "*Just as through one man sin entered the world and with sin death,*

so death has come to all men inasmuch as all sinned” (Romans 5:12). In a nutshell, death and all that leads to death has sin as its ultimate source. We cannot see of ourselves how this is so, but it has been revealed to us. It is obvious that this was accepted by the chosen people of God, for the questions put by people to our Lord imply it. On one occasion, recorded by John in his Gospel, our Lord was walking along and he saw a man who had been blind from birth. One wonders what the modern abortion campaigner would have thought of that blind man’s *quality of life*. Our Lord’s disciples asked him, “*was it his sin or that of his parents that caused him to be born blind?*” The intimate connection between sin, suffering and evil was taken for granted by the chosen people of God, so much so that it was assumed that if a person was suffering, then his *own* sin, or that of his *parents*, must have been the cause of it. Not so, the Teacher of mankind replied — sin was its cause, but not his *own* sin, nor that of his *parents*. Indeed, God allowed it so that his works would be shown in him: “*it was no sin either of this man or of his parents. Rather it*

was to let God's work show forth in him" (John 9:1-3). All of this brings us to our Gospel today (Luke 13: 1 9) , in which our Lord introduces further aspects of the problem of evil. Suffering and evil also, he says, constitute a call to repentance. *"Now there were some present on that very occasion who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."* If we see great suffering, this should lead us to repent and devote ourselves more generously to the work of God — which especially involves helping those who suffer. Especially, when we ourselves suffer, we ought turn to God as our truest consolation.

The greatest answer to suffering was not a merely intellectual answer. That greatest of answers was the embrace of suffering and death by Jesus Christ as the principal means of taking away the sin of the world. By his death, Christ ultimately destroyed our death. Because

of his sacrifice on Calvary, heaven was opened to us, and there lies before mankind a wondrous prospect of glory. How tragic were this to be lost! There is now not only suffering and death ahead of man, but the hope of endless glory. Let our Lord's words on suffering, tragedy and death call us to that repentance which will lead us to life, life here and above all life hereafter.

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Second reflection:

The Spirit of God As we look out on the world of wars, natural disasters and strife of all kinds, we may think that there is not much to be consoled about. Cardinal Newman was especially struck (in his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*) with the amount of evil and suffering in the world. This is not only the case with the objective world, but it is also the case with the inner world of each man's heart and mind. There is so much sin of which we are conscious — sin mixed up with the good, wheat mixed up with weeds. But there is a great fact which should change our entire

perspective. It is that “*the Spirit of God has made his home in you,*” as St Paul tells us in his Letter to the Romans (ch.8). Let us make the doctrine of the divine indwelling a cornerstone of our life. The triune God dwells within the baptised person who is in the state of grace. Because the Holy Spirit has made his home with us, we belong to Christ. Christ is in us, and we are in Christ. Now, the great characteristic of the Spirit of God that Scripture constantly brings to our notice is his *power*. It is by the *power* of the Holy Spirit that God the Son became man. It was by the *power* of the Holy Spirit that Jesus offered himself up as a victim to his heavenly Father.

This life is life eternal, a share in God’s life, it is a share in the holiness of God sanctifying us. By the *power* of the Holy Spirit God will sanctify us. Let us then live constantly in the company of our divine Guest, the Holy Spirit, asking him to make us holy as befits the children of God. He has the power and the love to do it.



Thirtieth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 105 (104):3-4 Let the hearts that seek the Lord rejoice; turn to the Lord and his strength; constantly seek his face.

Collect Almighty ever living God, increase our faith, hope and charity, and make us love what you command, so that we may merit what you promise. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Exodus 22:20-26; Psalm: 18:2-4, 47, 51;
1 Thessalonians 1:5c-10; Matthew 22:34-40

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love

your neighbour as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:34-40)

Our Mission In one of his books, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger stressed how important it is that each person learn how to *live*. He implied that it is an art, and that the development of this art does not come automatically and naturally. Let this general observation help us reflect on the all-important business of *living*, which some people reduce to the gaining of material wealth and possessions. Others understand it in terms of “attaining happiness.” That is to say, if one passes one’s years in contentment (say, in a happy marriage, free of personal tragedies, with economic sufficiency and respectable attainments to one’s credit), then one is deemed to have lived well. Others look beyond acquisitions or contentment to achievements in work. One has lived well if one has achieved a good deal, perhaps a great deal. For instance, one might have written a series of successful novels (such as the Harry Potter series). One might have entered politics and gained a ministerial position, and in

that position introduced significant policies and legislation that had to do with the improvement of the environment. These notions of living well and of success in life can have their origins in personal reflection, personal inclination and temperament, or in the influence of significant models and friendships. But the fact is that one can be very mistaken as to “how to live.” If man has a definite nature, then how one is to live cannot be simply a matter of arbitrary choice. We need to find out how to live, as something objective. Throughout history, people have looked to “masters” in the business of living — people filled with wisdom and not merely possessed of the capacity to attain chosen goals. The question, then, is that which was posed by the Ethiopian when Philip came to him asking if he understood what he was reading. “*How can I,*” he replied, “*unless some man guides me?*” (Acts 8:31). If we are to live well, we need a master, a guide. This is especially so, if we have an objective calling which transcends this life. If life has its ultimate term beyond this brief span of years, if our

destiny takes us to something definitive beyond this life, then we need a great master indeed.

Mankind is so singularly blessed, for it has been granted such a Master, one beyond all possible expectation. The Creator and Lord of the world has revealed himself and has vouchsafed to us a divine teaching telling us how to live. This Revelation was granted to a people over many centuries and was recorded in its tradition and its inspired Scriptures. In all of this, a Messiah was promised who, as the woman of Samaria at Jacob's Well said, "*when he comes, he will show us everything*" (John 4:25). The promised Messiah would show and teach man everything about how to live. God promised to send us a Master and Guide who would be all we need for wisdom — his anointed One, the Messiah, the Christ. Our Lord said to the Samaritan woman, "*I who speak to you am he*" (John 4:26). No other person or prophet in the Canon of the Scriptures claimed to be this promised One, only Jesus of Nazareth. I am the only way to the Father, he said — "*no one comes to the Father except through me.*" "*The Father*

and I are one,” he said. “He who sees me, sees the Father.” On the holy Mountain, when Jesus was transfigured in glory before his three disciples and conversed with two of the greatest figures of the Old Testament, the voice of the Father was heard: *“This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him!”* (Luke 9: 35). He is the Master to whom we must all listen. He tells mankind how to live. What then is his teaching? He commands us to *love*. That is the secret of life, and is the key to living. This is the art of arts, provided we understand that Jesus himself is the model of what it means to love. In our Gospel today, our Lord is asked what is the supreme commandment of God, the greatest commandment of the Law. *“Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments”* (Matthew 22: 34-40). There we have what it is to live: we are to love God with all our

strength, and our neighbour as ourselves. Now, there is a corollary to this — an important application.

The application is that we ought not only strive to love God above all things in our own private life, doing whatever he has commanded us to do. We ought, for love of neighbour, assist others in coming to know of God's Revelation, which more than anything else means coming to know and love Jesus Christ the Saviour of the world. He is the Master and Guide of all mankind, and the giver of eternal life and divine grace to all. He is our Redeemer, and it is imperative that the world come to know him. This is the greatest service we can offer the world — to help all to know Christ Jesus. This is the supreme mission of the Church and of the Church's members. It is to make disciples of all the nations. Let us take up this mission in our everyday life, and support the mission of the Church in those areas where Christ has not been heard and received.



Monday of the thirtieth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 105 (104):3-4 Let the hearts that seek the Lord rejoice; turn to the Lord and his strength; constantly seek his face.

Collect Almighty ever living God, increase our faith, hope and charity, and make us love what you command, so that we may merit what you promise. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ephesians 4:32-5:8; Ps. 1; Luke 13:10-17

On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, Woman, you are set free from your infirmity. Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God. Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the

synagogue ruler said to the people, There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath. The Lord answered him, You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her? When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing. (Luke 13:10-17)

Christ and Satan There is an interesting and significant detail which features prominently in this Gospel event. Luke tells us that “*On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years.*” The Greek states that she had “*a spirit of illness*” — meaning, “*a spirit which caused infirmity*” for eighteen years. So she was not simply crippled by a physical deterioration that prevented her from maintaining a normal erect position. Luke’s

sentence suggests that the principal agent was not mere physical illness but demonic. A demon had somehow gained access to her interior physical processes and was able to wreck her bodily wellbeing. There is not the slightest suggestion that she had been in any way at fault, herself thus opening the door, as it were, to some kind of entry by the demonic. The case was very different with Judas Iscariot — through various spiritual infidelities and a gradual loss of faith he had opened the door to Satan, who finally “*entered*” him — as we read in John’s account of the Last Supper (John 14:27). This woman’s condition instantly evoked Christ’s powerful compassion, and certainly not his condemnation. The point to notice here, though, is the very fact of this demonic influence on the physical condition of the woman. It surely suggests that there is more behind the scene of the world’s drama than meets the eye. For reasons known only to God, Satan is allowed a certain sway over events, including physical events — as even the Book of Job (1:12) suggests. It is all part of the horrible heritage of the Original Sin of our First

Parents. Communion with God was sundered by their prideful rebellion, and the gates were opened to influences other than God. This woman of our Gospel scene is an instance of this — and the point is amply confirmed by our Lord himself. Having healed the woman at a touch, our Lord was challenged by the synagogue official who demanded that people not present themselves for healing on the Sabbath. In his rebuttal, our Lord referred to “*this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years*”. If an ox or a donkey can be untied and led to water on the Sabbath, he said, how much more ought this woman be released from her satanic bonds and given relief on the Sabbath!

The point here is that the principal agent in her affliction was a demon, and behind this “*spirit of illness*” or “*spirit causing infirmity*,” there was Satan himself (Luke 13:16). We are reminded of our Lord’s reference to both the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Satan. *If Satan is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand?* our Lord asked his adversaries (Luke 11:18). This implies that

there is a certain strategic unity among the demons, under the hegemony of Satan. There is a satanic *kingdom* and it is hatefully opposed to the Kingdom of God, led by Jesus Christ. At the beginning of our Lord's public ministry, as he was preparing himself in the wilderness following the descent of the Holy Spirit on him at his Baptism, Satan approached him. Satan, then under the guise of the Serpent, had approached the Woman in the Garden at the beginning, and had succeeded in bringing her and the Man to their Fall. Here was a New Man, another Adam. So he approached — no ordinary demon, but Satan himself. Let us notice what he says, for it reveals to us something of a sway that Satan is granted in the course of the physical world. We read that *"the devil took him up, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, 'To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you, then, will worship me, it shall all be yours'"* (Luke 4: 5-8). Christ did not formally agree that it had been delivered to him, but nor did he dispute it. To a point

the statement was true. To a degree, the authority and the glory of the kingdoms of the world were in Satan's hands. We have in this text one instance of Satan attempting to make a tremendous and far-reaching deal with a specific individual, and promising to hand over to him power over the world, under certain conditions. The point here, though, is that Satan is shown to have a certain sway over the world, its physical reality as well as its history. It is a broader canvass against which we can place our incident today of the woman whom Satan had held bound for eighteen years. Modern secular man who denies the supernatural and allows only for what is empirically verifiable, is missing a powerful factor behind the empirical experience itself.

Our Gospel scene today shows us that whatever of the evil influences on the world that transcend sight and sound, man has an all-powerful and all-holy Saviour. He is the Saviour of the world, and against him Satan is as nothing. At a word he released the woman from the bonds that Satan had imposed on her (Luke 13: 10-17). What we

must do is take our stand with him, live in union with him, sharing his divine life by means of the gift of grace, and resolve to keep his commandments for love of him. If we do this, all will be well, and life will be ours.

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Second reflection:

Religious fear On one occasion when he was leading the Oxford Movement, John Henry Newman had a visit from like-minded Cambridge men. They told him about certain others at Cambridge, and Newman said of them, “What they lack is fear.” He meant that if they were ever to take God seriously, they would have to start with fearing him. Malcolm Muggeridge once said that the superstitious primitives who were fearful of various invisible powers were closer to the reality of things than the secular minded modern man. Both Newman and Muggeridge were pointing out that the fear and superstition characteristic of a certain level of religiosity is in advance of the secular and liberal mindset that is carefree in respect

to God. The awesome reality of God is scarcely apprehended by such a person. Nature at its best will fear God because at its best it will have an inkling of his awesome holiness and power. If there is little or no fear of offending God, it is an indication that God is not taken seriously. We are by nature God's dependent and sinful creatures. This having been said, the Christian has received the gift of the Holy Spirit which makes him a child of God and not merely a (guilty) servant or slave. As St Paul tells us, the "*Spirit you have received is not the spirit of slaves bringing fear into your lives again; it is the Spirit of sons, and it makes us cry out "Abba, Father!"*" We are children of God with a marvellous prospect ahead of us. We are "*heirs of God and co heirs of Christ, sharing his sufferings so as to share his glory*" (Romans 8). Let us take God very seriously. The most natural thing in the world is to fear the great God. That being said, let us who are baptised understand that by God's gift we are his children, not his slaves.



Tuesday of the thirtieth week of Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: Ephesians 5:21-33; Psalm 127;

Luke 13:18-21

Jesus asked, What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches. Again he asked, What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a

large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.
(Luke 13:18-21)

Divine grace She is now in her ninety-second year, and very frail. All her life she has been a little frail, but paradoxically, tough as well. Years ago she underwent a stroke, but survived and carried on. She never had much formal schooling — a little more than primary school, and she was never much of a reader in terms of recreation and culture. Her reading was, in the main, religious. She could be surprising to those who were aware of the spiritual classics. For instance, for years she read repeatedly *The Cloud of Unknowing* which she accidentally stumbled across. She skipped the Introduction which discussed the history and significance of *The Cloud*, and simply read the text. She liked it, and read it repeatedly — not as an academic, but as a simple, relatively uneducated religious reader. She understood it. She was naturally intelligent and capable, but the notable thing about her was her unflagging Catholic Faith. Her faith never dimmed but grew, and with it, religious understanding. She had a sixth

sense as to what was right and unswervingly accepted Catholic teaching. If the Pope declared something in his religious teaching, she accepted it as from the Lord. She loved the Pope as the Vicar of Jesus Christ on earth. Her life revolved around the Eucharist, and in particular daily Mass. She loved the saints, especially Mary the mother of Jesus. She regularly frequented the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and had her daily round of prayers, with pride of place given to the Rosary. She had a very sensitive conscience, and would never do anything deliberately that was obviously wrong. She strove to keep God's commandments as her love. This Catholic spirit which was ever growing all her life was not the fruit simply of a personal bent or of decisions in the way that, say, one might actively develop a particular interest during life. There was something more than this guiding her on and carrying her forward in her love for God. Now in her ninety-second year she loves Jesus Christ, the angels and saints, the Church — Christ's creation — and the members of her family for whom she is always praying. What I am

saying is that this good lady is a work of God's grace. Grace is behind it.

We see something of this in history. Ireland was evangelized by Saint Patrick, though there was something of a Christian presence there prior to him. It is probable that the knowledge of Christianity that existed in Ireland before the arrival of Palladius and Patrick (perhaps in 431 and 432, respectively) came from Britain, with which the Irish then kept up constant intercourse, and where there were large numbers of Christians from a very early time. However, the great body of the Irish were pagans when St. Patrick arrived in 432; and to him belongs the glory of converting them. Patrick boldly confronted the druids at Tara and banned their rituals. He converted many influential chieftains and princes, baptizing them in the holy wells. Well, just as Patrick himself was the work of grace — with which he generously co-operated during his strenuous life — so was the extraordinary Catholic history of Ireland. The greatest fruit of grace is enduring faith amid difficulties. Poland could be cited, as well as other

countries. The history of these countries also shows the hazards that can attack and undermine the life of grace, and how the faith can be greatly weakened (as in modern Ireland) or even lost. The general point here, though, is that we have a higher principle of life on which we can depend and from which we can draw in our desire to live well and even heroically. The key to the really good life is the knowledge and love of a particular Person, Jesus Christ the divine Redeemer of man. Each person, each society and nation, and all of humanity are called to accept Jesus Christ as Lord, and to find life in his name. This is what it is to enter God's Kingdom. Therein lies the path to life in abundance, which is none other than living in the state of grace. In our Gospel, our Lord stresses this power of grace to produce spiritual growth: *"It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches."* Or again, *"It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough"* (Luke 13: 18-21). Grace is the

principle of the religious life that God himself has established, and which is built on and elevates man's natural religious sense.

Let us look to divine grace, and depend on it. It is the gift of God. In his words to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well, Christ said: *"if you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water"* (John 4:10). That elderly lady I mentioned earlier, now nearing her end, has drunk from that living water all her life. She knows the gift of God and Who it is who offers it. There have been nations who have come to know the gift of God, and whose acceptance of the gift has produced saints and sanctity to an impressive degree. Let us prize the grace of God and resolve to live by it.

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Second reflection: (Luke 13:18-21)

Patience A person who has no patience is very limited in what he will be able to attain. The attainment of goals involves a steady and persevering effort amid inevitable difficulties. Connected with patience is hope. Despite what may appear to be a lack of progress, the man of patience continues to hope that he will attain his chosen goal. This is especially so in the Christian life, the goal of which is the perfect love of God. We are burdened with numerous and profoundly entrenched faults that require both patience and hope in the work of overcoming them. The service of others to which God calls us in life inevitably involves difficulties and many disappointments. Our work for others and our progress in sanctity require patience and hope day by day over the years of our life. Our Lord describes the Kingdom of God, God's rule in us, as being like the growth of a mustard seed into a tree, and as like the yeast that gradually leavens the flour (Luke 13: 18-21). It requires hope and patience — a glorious hope, for as St Paul writes, "*what we suffer in this life can never*

be compared to the glory, as yet unrevealed, which is waiting for us” (Rom 8:18).

What then is the secret? At least part of the secret is always to be starting again. Every day let us put the past with its burdensome memories behind us, and begin again with our sights on the final goal. That goal we shall attain by serving God totally in the present. So then, now I begin!



Wednesday of the thirtieth week of Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: Ephesians 6:1-9; Ps. 144; Luke 13:22-30

Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. Someone asked him, “Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?” He said to them, “Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, ‘Sir, open the door for us.’ “But he will answer, ‘I don’t

know you or where you come from.’ “Then you will say, ‘We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.’ “But he will reply, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evildoers!’ “There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last.” (Luke 13:22-30)

Salvation

One of the great issues since the beginning of the twenty-first century has been the state of the environment and the various threats to its wellbeing. This issue was controverted, with some maintaining that the human factor in its deterioration was vastly overplayed. Others insisted that the scientific evidence for this was utterly probative. Be all this as it may, the point here is that the environment was regarded as an arena of possible disaster. It is an instance of threat and hazard in the life of

man. Years back, over-population was seen to be the major threat — and China, for instance, launched into its simplistic and socially disastrous one-child per family policy. Threats are everywhere, from the threat of natural disasters such as floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, to that of civil wars and revolutions with their movements of refugees and large scale famines. Catastrophes can hit individuals, families, societies, nations. The United States of America, the most powerful country on the globe at the beginning of the twenty-first century, has been faced with a mind-boggling financial debt. The life of man is strewn with hazards and there is nothing he can do to be simply rid of them. He is part of an essentially vulnerable and contingent reality which is not only dependent for its very existence on the one and only necessary Being, but which, because of the Original Fall of man, is dislocated from its natural communion with that great Being, its Creator. Nothing in man nor in man's world is inherently secure: its security depends on the sustaining touch of God, the only necessary One. Man must continually work at maintaining

his life and security, alive to the threats and hazards ahead. But there is one threat which the nations of the modern era tend especially to overlook, and that is the grand threat which looms before him in the *Afterlife*. Yes, he works and strives to preserve his life — but, of course, ultimately his life will be taken from him somehow, and this inevitable event of death will always be relatively soon. What then? The biggest threat of all is that which no eye can see nor ear hear. It is the threat of what might happen after he dies. How foolish to ignore this threat, while taking seriously the merely temporal ones!

There is surely nothing more pressing than the question of what will happen to us after death. There is a universal sense that the Afterlife will be unending in some way — even though there are those who adopt a position of extinction. They think that with the end of this life there is an end of everything, in terms of the individual. But to say the least, this opinion is most unusual, and even eccentric. It would be a tremendous gamble to live according to it, and to eat, drink and be merry “for tomorrow we die.” The

greatest religious Teacher in mankind's history, Jesus Christ, has taught that following life there is God's Judgment, and at the end of human history, there will be the final General Judgment of God. He himself will be the Judge. It will come down to one alternative: Heaven or Hell — it will be one or the other for each person. We are faced with an eternity following death, unending existence in which we shall either be in joy or in misery. What it will be will depend on how we have lived in a moral sense — have I striven to be good in God's sight, or have I cared little for goodness and pursued the path of self-gratification and sin? So it is that the question posed in our Gospel today is of momentous importance: "*Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem. Someone asked him, 'Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?'*" Who will be saved? Will I be saved? Let us notice that our Lord does not answer that question in the way it was phrased. He tells us, rather, what we are to do about it. We must struggle to attain salvation. "*He said to them, 'Make every effort to enter*

through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to. Once the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you will stand outside knocking and pleading, Sir, open the door for us. But he will answer, 'I don't know you or where you come from.'“ We must make every effort to enter by the narrow door, which is none other than the doing of God's will whatever be the difficulty. Further, our Lord insists that nothing can be taken for granted: *“there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last”* (Luke 13: 22-30).

Life is short, and it is full of hazards. A man in seeming health suddenly is discovered to have terminal cancer, and is gone within eight weeks. Life is short, and eternity is long. The one thing necessary is that we gain life eternal. The question posed to our Lord by that good young man is relevant to every person of every age: *“Good master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”* (Luke 18:18). In today's text the question is: *“Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?”* The issue is the same: we must do all we can to get to Heaven, and the greatest

service we can do to another, let alone to a whole society, is to help that person be saved. The only name by which all men are saved is that of Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12). He is the one and only Saviour of the world.

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Second reflection: (Luke 13:22-30)

The help of the Spirit Among the sources of the religious instinct in man is surely his sense of personal weakness. Because he senses that he is weak, he looks to the powers above – however he might conceive or imagine them. A person who has little sense of personal weakness may find it difficult to acknowledge the divine. It was by no means uncommon in the ancient world for rulers to claim divine status (as did, say, Alexander the Great) buttressed by their illusion of personal power and lack of a sense of weakness. They forgot that they were weak, and that they needed God. Now, we have received the Holy

Spirit as Christ's gift. Our Lord said that when we are in situations of oppression and difficulty, that will be the opportunity to bear witness. We need not, he said, be worried about what we shall say because the Spirit of our Father will be speaking within us. He will help us in our weakness. St Paul tells us that "*the Spirit comes to help us in our weakness. For when we cannot choose words in order to pray properly, the Spirit himself expresses our plea in a way that could never be put into words*" (Romans 8). So the Holy Spirit will be our support in prayer to God, and will enable us to pray.

In today's Gospel (Luke 13: 22-30) our Lord warns us to "*try your best to enter by the narrow door, because, I tell you, many will try to enter and will not succeed.*" Let us call on the help of the Holy Spirit far more than we do. Let us recognise in faith his presence within us because of our baptism, and turn to him as our God and our Friend. By the power of the Holy Spirit our Lord saved us from the power of sin, and by his power we are being sanctified. We must remain in his grace. Let us recognise our

weakness not only as creatures, but as children of God, and recognising this, let us cast ourselves on the care of the Divine Spirit who is the Love of God.



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Scripture today: Ephesians 6:10-20; Psalm 143;

Luke 13:31-35

At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you. He replied, Go tell that fox, 'I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will attain my end.' But for today and tomorrow and the next day I must keep going — for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem! O Jerusalem,

Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! So be it! Your house will be left to you. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.' (Luke 13:31-35)

Christ's courage We read in the First Book of Kings of how Elijah the prophet of Yahweh confronted the four hundred and fifty prophets of Ba'al on Mount Carmel (18:17-40). He was victorious in the test of a burnt offering and then had them all executed. At that, Jezebel, King Ahab's pagan wife (16:31), who had patronised the prophets of Ba'al (18:19), sent a messenger to Elijah with the promise that she would arrest and execute him by the morrow for what he had done to them (19:1-2). We read that Elijah was then "*afraid, and he arose and went for his life, and came to Beersheba,*" going on a day's journey into the wilderness, full of desolation (19: 3-4). So, at the real threat to his life, Elijah was terrified and fled, and was

brought to the brink of a form of despair. That was centuries before Christ, and our scene today shows us the Pharisees coming to Jesus and warning him that Herod wanted to kill him. Whether this was really so, we are not told. Our passage is from the Gospel of St Luke, and in Luke's account of the Passion, Pilate sends Christ to Herod when he learns that he is a Galilean. We read that "*when Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him*" (Luke 23:8). In the event, Herod sent Christ back to Pilate dressed ridiculously as royalty. It does not look as if Herod really was seeking to kill Christ. However, this was the threat that was conveyed to Jesus: "*At that time some Pharisees came to Jesus and said to him, Leave this place and go somewhere else. Herod wants to kill you.*" Christ was sovereignly unmoved by the news. He was a man of pre-eminent courage, and he knew what and when his hour would be: "*He replied, Go tell that fox, 'I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I*

will attain my end.’ But for today and tomorrow and the next day I must keep going — for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!’ There are many things which distinguish Jesus Christ as a man and a prophet — prescinding from the divinity of his Person. One of those things was his intrepid courage. Nothing, nothing whatever could deter or shake him from the path of doing the will of the Father and completing his work on earth.

This resolve was not just a matter of sheer grit. It was suffused and brimming over with *love*. Love was at the heart of his undaunted strength, his resolve and his courage. This we see in the next words of Christ as he refers to the City which was so much the object of God’s love. Jerusalem! Jerusalem was the heart and crown of the Promised Land, the location of the Temple and therefore the special abode here on earth of the Father almighty. Jerusalem was the Holy City, the City of the most remarkable Temple among the nations. It was the House of Christ’s heavenly Father. How Christ loved Jerusalem! *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and*

stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! So be it!" (Luke 13:31-5). In these words, so full of pathos, we sense the grandeur of Christ's love and of his resolve to go forward into the lion's den of his enemies, there to bear witness to his Person and mission. There he would declare before the highest religious representatives of the nation who he was and what he had come to do. He did this because of his *love*, a courageous love the equal of which had never been seen in Israel. It surpassed Elijah, as all the prophets. There have been many heroic people in human history. Alexander the Great was a man of remarkable exploits. East of Porus' kingdom, he encountered the Malli clans (in modern day Multan). During a siege, Alexander jumped into the fortified city with only two of his bodyguards and was wounded seriously by a Mallian arrow. His forces, believing their king dead, took the citadel and unleashed their fury on the Malli who had taken refuge within it, perpetrating a massacre, sparing no man, woman or child.

Then, due to the efforts of his surgeon, Kritodemos of Kos, Alexander survived the injury. But it was all for personal glory. Christ, on the other hand, with a love without limit, took unto himself the work of atoning for the sins of the whole world. Consider Alexander — and how many and how grievous were his sins! Think, then, of the whole world. The Lamb of God was taking away the sin of the world. How great the task and the courage!

The moral stature of Jesus Christ is without compare in the annals of human history, and a significant feature of this was his courage. Nothing could sway him, nothing could make him wilt, however great might be his fear as in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was a real man, with every bit of the human nature that is ours — though his Person was divine. He feared what was to come because of its unparalleled enormity, but this did not shake his resolve. At the heart of this was *love*, love for his heavenly Father and love for us his brothers and sisters. This spirit of his was the Spirit of God, and he shares this Holy Spirit with those who believe in him. By the power of this divine

Spirit we are enabled to become more and more like Jesus Christ.

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Second reflection: (Luke 13: 31-5)

Knowing God's love To grow in the Christian spirit we must come to know the love of Christ and to put our faith in it. Very many people do not realize that God loves them, and the result is that God remains distant to them. The philosophical position once in vogue and known as Deism accepted the existence of God, but looked on him as one who, having created and initiated the world, left what he had created to its own momentum, its own laws and history, and refrained from any further interventions. One suspects that elements of this view constitute the position of various theists even now, and certainly in sectors of the popular mind. There are other systems of thought and religions which greatly emphasise

the transcendence of God, while having little sense of his immanence. What is lacking experientially is a personal discovery of God's love. God has *revealed* his love for us. If we do not embrace this revelation, it is hard to see how the love of God in a powerful and personal sense will be discovered. Now, it is Jesus who is the fullness of God's revelation. It is he who reveals the Father's love. "*He who sees me, sees the Father,*" he declared. In today's Gospel (Luke 13: 31-5) our Lord gives expression to his divine and human love for God's people: "*Jerusalem, Jerusalem, ... How often have I longed to gather your children, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you refused!*" These words our Lord utters to us as well. He invites us to gather under his protection and to live in his love. Let us actively appreciate our Lord's words of love as they are repeated by him across the pages of the Gospel. Let us come to him, learn of him, and live in him and in his love. He is our life.

Whatever be the things that trouble and worry us, whatever be the deprivations we experience, nothing

separates us from his love. We can always depend on it. The task, though, is to discover and appreciate this love. We do this by meditating on the Person and the words of Jesus as revealed in the Gospel and as transmitted to us by the Church. Let us pray for a profound knowledge of the love of Jesus Christ.



Friday of the thirtieth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 105 (104):3-4 Let the hearts that seek the Lord rejoice; turn to the Lord and his strength; constantly seek his face.

Collect Almighty ever living God, increase our faith, hope and charity, and make us love what you command, so that we may merit what you promise. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Philippians 1:1-11; Psalm Ps 111:1-6;
Luke 14:1-6

One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a leading Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. There in front of him was a man suffering from dropsy. Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?" But they remained silent. So taking hold of the man, he healed him and sent him on his way. Then he asked them, "If one of you has a child or an

ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull it out?” And they could not reply to this.
(Luke 14:1-6)

Looking The Gospels report repeated and sharp clashes between Jesus and the Pharisees, with the Pharisees being dominated and worsted in the encounters. But they also report Jesus *dining* in the houses of Pharisees as a result of their invitations. It surely indicates that at least many Pharisees, even if opposed to Jesus and uncomprehending of his ministry and practices, did not perceive him as having anything of a *personal* hostility to them. It also indicates that Jesus was perceived as combining high personal holiness with an ease in all kinds of situations — be they elaborate dinners, or poverty in which he had nowhere to lay his head. One can scarcely imagine John the Baptist being invited to, and accepting, an invitation to a sumptuous dinner. Christ was all things to all men in his mission to bring sinners to repentance — including sinners among the Pharisees. So our Lord “*went to eat in the house of a leading Pharisee*”. Then Luke

gives us a detail: It was a Sabbath day, and “*they watched him closely*”. The Greek verb is worth considering. It is *paratēroumenoi auton*. The word *para* can mean various things, but one is *from or at the side*. The verb *tēreō* means *observe*. *Paratēroumenoi auton* can carry the suggestion of *standing by the side and watching him* — as it were, looking sideways out of the corner of one’s eye. When used in this sense, it is looking at a person narrowly, not as an open stare but in somewhat hidden fashion. One’s full attention is being given to what a person is doing, but without giving him the honour of showing it in full and obvious fashion. There is the suggestion of hostile intent behind the careful and surreptitious gaze. Luke had used the word before in describing the gaze of the scribes and the Pharisees to see whether Jesus would heal on the Sabbath in the synagogue (Luke 6:7). Luke uses the word again in 20:20, and in Acts 9:24. This point cannot be pressed too hard, because the word can be used in much less menacing senses. Anyway, certainly in this context our Lord’s observers are watching with hearts disposed in a

certain way — and this is the point we may consider here in our Gospel today. It reminds us that in matters of real human concern, man does not gaze with a *tabula rasa*, as Locke described the intellect of man.

In his famous work, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (17th century), John Locke had it that the human mind is at birth a “blank slate” without structure for processing data from the senses, and that both data and methods of processing are formed from the input from sensory experiences. The mind is born blank — and each individual is free to define his or her own character. The mind is free and self-authored. I suppose we could say that this envisages the human being just gazing on the world with nothing more involved in the gaze than the act of sight and viewing. The world is thus seen as it is, and judgments are made according to what is objectively seen. But no — there is much more involved in the gaze of man than his mere outward gaze. There was much more involved in the gaze of the Pharisees on our Lord than their mere viewing of him. They gazed, as it were, from the corner of their

eye, and watched him narrowly — for their *attitude was hostile*, though kept hidden from the gaze of others and veiled by a cloak of religious respectability and zeal. That is to say, the gaze of man on the world is deeply influenced by his will, by his fundamental dispositions, by his desires — in a word, by his moral life. There is an epistemological position which places the emphasis on the act of *judgment*. In view of the influence of the will on how we judge, I myself would place a greater stress on the *will* and its dispositions. In his most interesting book (*A Priest in Russia and the Baltic*, 1955), Father Charles Bourgeois SJ wrote at the end (ch. XIX, p.139) that “It has been said that those who would believe in God, will do so more easily if they first of all *desire* that there should be a God — that the arguments for the existence of God will be more fully effective, will help more powerfully towards an act of assent, in a soul which *hopes* that they are valid. There lies hidden in the human heart a spirit of mockery, a depth of malice, a capacity for enjoyment at seeing others stumble, a fundamental indiscipline which takes pleasure in

disorder, in giving scandal and in causing destruction. When we are mastered by such a spirit, we lack the right dispositions for believing in God.”

The Pharisees in our Gospel scene today (Luke 14: 1-6) gazed on our Lord with a *bad will*. Because of this they were blind. They could not see, even though they were looking. The problem lay at the roots of the soul, in the depths of the heart. Indeed, at such depths, like the deepest depths of the sea, it is out of human reach. What we must do is place ourselves continually in the presence of the all-merciful God present and revealed in his incarnate Son, and ask that by his grace he give us the right beginnings, the right first principles, the correct starting points enabling us to see with the mind of Christ. Then we must be faithful to God’s action and renounce deliberate sin, for sin makes us blind.



Saturday of the thirtieth week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 105 (104):3-4 Let the hearts that seek the Lord rejoice; turn to the Lord and his strength; constantly seek his face.

Collect Almighty ever living God, increase our faith, hope and charity, and make us love what you command, so that we may merit what you promise. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Philippians 1:18-26; Psalm 41;

Luke 14:1, 7-11

One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honour at the table, he told them this parable: When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honour, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of

you will come and say to you, 'Give this man your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honoured in the presence of all your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. (Luke 14:1, 7-11)

Wisdom In our gospel scene, on the one hand we have before us Jesus of Nazareth, on the other hand we have the Pharisee and his class. In a formal sense, Christ was relatively unschooled. That is to say, he had not attended, as a scholar and apprentice, the leading religious teachers of the day — as did, say, Paul of Tarsus who subsequently rose to prominence as a Pharisee. Putting it in contemporary terms, he did not have university qualifications such as a masters or a doctorate. Our Lord had not “studied.” Rather, he suddenly appeared as from nowhere, out of an obscure village of a few hundred inhabitants within walking distance of the bustling and

cosmopolitan city of Zephoris. The striking phenomenon about him was that he was filled with wisdom, and knew everything. He depended on no-one, and appeared as having full authority to speak and teach in a way that transcended the scholars, the scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the priests — all parties of influence in the nation. They could not hold a candle to him, as we might say. Nor was it as if he gradually proved himself, as one would now by an increasing number of academic articles or proven achievements to one's credit. Jesus Christ *suddenly* appeared in a public way as teacher (Rabbi), and more importantly, was rapidly recognized as a great prophet of God. A great light suddenly appeared in the hills and plains of Galilee, going from village and town and farm, speaking of the arrival of God's rule. As I say, the striking thing about this Man was not only his dazzling miracles which showed, as the Pharisee Nicodemus admitted, that he was sent from God. It was his wisdom, his religious insight, his remarkable and unerring judgment as to who God is and what man should do, which was the

phenomenon of the day. He had not “studied” but all addressed him as the pre-eminent Rabbi, the Teacher. He was this, though, in a unique sense. All his superabundant wisdom and knowledge came directly from God — and not from any of the “schools.” There had been something of a discovery of this even when he was a boy. Luke tells us that when Mary and Joseph found him in the Temple, he was dazzling the doctors with his intelligence, his insight, his knowledge, and his deep and probing questions.

So on the one hand, we have in our Gospel scene today this Jesus of Nazareth — by any standards, a personality of utter distinction in the annals of history. I like to set Jesus Christ next to the greatest lights of classical culture, say, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Christ’s human mind, in its intellectual approach, was utterly different from their Greek cast, so full as they were of talent. His human mind was Semitic and in the line of the great prophets. But manifestly, his wisdom far surpassed theirs, as did his instant insight into and grasp of things to do with God and human living. Imagine a

dialogue between them — I envisage those Greek sages being profoundly impressed with the intelligence and wisdom of Jesus Christ, let alone with his manifest moral stature. He would have instantly plumbed the depths of their positions, and assessed their value. But of course, Christ's personal mission in time was not to enter into a dialogue with Greek culture — he would leave that to his body the Church, in the centuries to come. But now, there he is in our Gospel scene today, dining by invitation in the house of a prominent Pharisee, where he was being watched by that class. They could not but respect him. On one occasion they admitted to him that he was swayed by no one, whatever be his rank or position. Christ was manifestly conscious of being the very light of the world. There he was, sovereignly at ease among his silent and cautious critics — and his wisdom and insight thereupon comes into play. He sees that they ensured in their seating their pride of position. They chose the important places, the places where they would be honoured and noticed. In a word, their effort was to exalt themselves — and how

typical was this of human behaviour! From age to age ever since the Original Fall, man had tried to exalt himself. Here the leading religious minds and teachers were doing the same. Christ there and then overturns their “wisdom,” their assumptions, their ways, their notions of the good life, their idea of fulfilment. *“When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honour,”* he says to them. *“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted”* (Luke 14: 1, 7-11).

Let us take our scene today, and Christ’s radical summary of the good life, the life that will bring true human exaltation, as yet another instance of his unequalled wisdom and teaching. He is the definitive source of light for man, man who is so prone to dwell in the darkness, a darkness of death. Socrates, so wise, willingly chose to put an end to his own life when directed to do so by civil authority. How far from the wisdom of God! The Pharisees, who, as our Lord said on one occasion, occupied the chair of Moses, were so blind. Jesus Christ is *the Way*,

the Truth and the Life — and he humbled himself even to death. Let us take our stand by him and follow his Way!

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Second reflection (Luke 14:1)

“Now, on a Sabbath day Jesus had gone for a meal ...; and they watched him closely.”

In our Gospel passage today (Luke 14: 1, 7-11) our Lord is described as going for a meal at the house of one of the leading Pharisees. They were proud — and they were to hear a lesson from our Lord about humility. He was not among friends. There is a detail in this regard that offers food for thought: it is that “*they watched him closely.*” It leads us to think of what it is to gaze on the face of Christ. In one of his writings Pope St Paul VI spoke of how we yearn to see the face of Christ. Pope Benedict XVI spoke of Christ being the face of God. We remember that Gospel scene in which, while Martha bustled about doing the

serving and getting irritated with her sister, Mary sat at the Lord's feet listening to him speaking. She was gazing on the face of Christ with utter attention. Our Lord commended her (in this instance) for doing that, and held her up for imitation by Martha. On the other hand we remember how Herod is described in the Gospels as wanting "to see" Jesus. He was curious. But our Lord would have none of it. When he was brought before Herod during his Passion he refused so much as to speak to Herod. And here in our Gospel scene today those who were dining with our Lord "*watched him closely*". They lacked the loving humility which is the only appropriate attitude in the presence of Christ. They lacked faith.

The only profitable form of gazing on the Person of Christ is that which is the fruit of faith, hope and love. The Christian in his life of prayer ought be striving to gaze on the face of Christ — at the level of his heart. We call it contemplation. He ought be acting each day out of that contemplation, as a contemplative in action. The source of his life and energy ought be his loving and continuous gaze

on Christ, a heart to heart gaze in which he knows that in the first instance Christ has been gazing on him. Christ has been gazing on him with love from all eternity. Our gaze on Christ is in response to his loving gaze on us. Indeed, the life of the Christian is a life lived in the warmth of this divine gaze.



Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 38 (37):22-23 Forsake me not, O Lord, my God; be not far from me! Make haste and come to my help, O Lord, my strong salvation!

Collect Almighty and merciful God, by whose gift your faithful offer you right and praiseworthy service, grant, we pray, that we may hasten without stumbling to receive the things you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Malachi 1:14-2: 2.8-10; Psalm 130;
1 Thessalonians 2:7-9.13; Matthew 23:1-12

Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practise what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift

a finger to move them. Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honour at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the market places and to have men call them 'Rabbi'. But you are not to be called 'Rabbi', for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth 'father', for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called 'teacher', for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. (Matthew 23:1-12)

One Lord and Father

In our Gospel today (Matthew 23: 1-12), our Lord reminds us that we have only one Lord and Father, and he is God in heaven, and that we have only one Teacher, and he is Christ. What our Lord is saying is a variation of the first of the Ten Commandments, that there is only one God, and we are to serve him alone. From him comes all authority, and those exercising

authority and those subject to it must all strive to acknowledge and serve God alone. No-one, in any sense whatever, is to arrogate independently to himself God's place, glory or authority. On one occasion our Lord was asked which is the first of the commandments. He said that this is the first, that we are to love the Lord our God with all our mind, heart, soul and strength (Luke 10:27). If the individual and society are ever to learn how to live in happiness and fulfilment, this fundamental commandment must be observed. If God's authority is neglected and forgotten, the wellbeing of man and society will be neglected and forgotten. Of course, there are all sorts of difficulties in recognizing the authority of God in daily and social life. Our Lord himself alludes to one such, at the start of our Gospel passage (Matthew 23: 1). He tells the people and his disciples that *"The scribes and the Pharisees occupy the chair of Moses. You must therefore do what they tell you and listen to what they say; but do not be guided by what they do."* Here our Lord is addressing those who were subject to authority. There was this

difficulty, that even though those exercising authority were not worthy incumbents of their office, their authority had to be respected for they occupied the chair of Moses. In fulfilling our duties in society, we are answerable to persons who exercise civil and social authority, and who, however, may be unworthy. The temptation will be, especially in a democratic society in which authorities are readily attacked, to disregard and have little respect for authority itself because of its all-too human and faulty bearers. We must daily find God in all things, and, to the extent possible, in the authority being exercised over us in social and civil life. Of course, our Lord not only addresses those subject to authority. He also addresses those possessed of authority. To some extent, that will include most of us. He tells those who are in some sense a master or a teacher or a father to remember that God is the only Master, the only Father, and the only Teacher.

In respect to this, let us remember that most people have at least some influence and some authority. They may possess some authority in the home or in the

workplace. They may exercise some influence over others due to their greater knowledge of some field, or because of some other attainments or personal gifts. Whatever be our position and influence and the good we may have done and are currently doing, we must remember that God is its ultimate source and to him we must give the glory. He is the only Master, Father and Teacher. To him we ought be referring those who might be disposed to give us the glory. All this is to say that whoever we are, whether in authority or subject to it, whether influencing others or being influenced by them, whether we are a teacher in some sense or a pupil in some other sense, whatever be our situation, we ought be striving to love and serve God and him alone. We are to serve our fellow man, but always in union with God and according to his will. It is God who is the Master, the Teacher, the Father. He is the all. The danger of the modern secular age is to accept, allow and aspire to moral goodness while not allowing nor aspiring to religion. We are tempted to a humanism without God, to the attempt to make man central while regarding God as

absent or an appendage. We cheerfully neglect God — nay, we tend to *banish* God from life and society. Our danger is that we shall fail to recognize and serve God in all that we do, and instead accept the prevailing cultural and social assumption, which is that of Morality without Religion. Our secular age thinks that it is right and proper to be free of the thought of God and to build our civilization according to what is right, but as if God were not a reality, a mere opinion, indeed a phantom. The reality of God is quietly and politely shelved and the business of life pursued with other masters, fathers and teachers happily installed in God's place. We can be infected with this attitude. The virtue of religion, that virtue whereby we give homage to God, is deemed to be a private and unnecessary feature of the human personality. It is looked upon as a prop or a function of something else which is more useful. Our Lord makes it clear in our Gospel today (Matthew 23: 1-12) that no one and nothing is to usurp the reality and supreme position of God in everything.

Religion is not just a private matter. It is also public and objective, for God who is our Creator, our Lord and Redeemer, is the fundamental Reality sustaining all of creation. Let us never, in effect, exalt ourselves before God by pushing him from our sight and service. As our Lord says, “*whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.*” Let us make it a daily mission of our life, to do all we can to ensure that in all things God is served, honoured and glorified as the one Lord, Father and Teacher of man, society and all things, seen and unseen.



Monday of the thirty-first week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 38 (37):22-23 Forsake me not, O Lord, my God; be not far from me! Make haste and come to my help, O Lord, my strong salvation!

Collect Almighty and merciful God, by whose gift your faithful offer you right and praiseworthy service, grant, we pray, that we may hasten without stumbling to receive the things you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Philippians 2:1-4; Psalm 130;

Luke 14:12-14

Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay

you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” (Luke 14:12-14)

Religion and life When anyone is described as a “religious person,” the immediate image conjured up is of one who is oriented towards the worship and acknowledgment of God. This, of course, is correct. It is somewhat meaningless to speak of someone as “religious” who does not acknowledge God. However, what is then commonly done is to *restrict* the notion of religion to the acknowledgment of God, allowing for nothing in the idea of religion beyond this. That is to say, “religion” is *merely* that dimension of life which is related explicitly to the worship of God and the formal recognition of him in a variety of ways. That is, it is distinct from daily life. In classical Rome, the *pontifex maximus* (the state high priest) served for life, and he remained, officially, a citizen. He was chairman of the college of the *pontifices*, ‘priests’. They were responsible for the Roman state cult as a whole and for several cults in particular — such as the cults that had no priestly college of their own (such as the *augures*,

the *decem viri sacris faciundis* and the *fetiales*). Julius Caesar (100 BC — 44 BC) was elected *pontifex maximus* in 63 BC and kept the office until his death by assassination. “Religion” was equated with *cult*, and Julius Caesar, the high priest, was also a busy and scheming politician, a writer of Latin prose, army general, conqueror, and finally “dictator in perpetuity” of the Roman state. Essentially it was he who brought the Republic into being the Empire. All the while he was chief priest of the state, which tells us something of the notion of religion in Rome. When “religion” is restricted to the practice of cult and official prayer alone, “religion” can be a very comfortable business indeed, and corrupt as well. “Religion” can be divorced from daily life and its moral demands. The activities of daily life are pursued according to norms that have little to do with God or the gods, whose influence is confined to moments of formal worship and prayer. It means too that “religion” can easily become a means of self-serving and career advancement. Now, one of the distinguishing features of Revealed Religion was its

intimate connection with life. While the first three of the Ten Commandments lay down the requirements of religious belief and worship, the remaining seven govern everyday life. Christ stated that the Law and the Prophets hung on two commandments: the love of God *and also* of neighbour.

This is an immensely important matter in Revealed Religion. It is notoriously the complaint and the charge of those who reject religion that “religious” people are not especially moral and good in everyday life. There is, they insist, a great disparity between their lives and their profession of a moral religion. The prophets inveighed against the practice of religion that involved holocausts and sacrifices while justice and mercy were left undone. This was no religion at all, in God’s sight. We read in Psalm 146: 9 that the Lord watches over the sojourners and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked. That is to say, what happens in everyday life is of immense importance in the sight of God. The prophet Isaiah writes: “*Learn to do right! Seek justice,*

encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow” (Isaiah 1:17). Again, “Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow’s case does not come before them” (Isaiah 1: 23). So it is that in our Gospel passage today, our Lord says to the prominent Pharisee and his friends with whom he was dining, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 14:12-14). When Judas left the Last Supper, others of the Twelve thought that Christ had told him to buy something for the feast, or that he should give something to the poor (John 13:29) — let us note, that giving to the poor was a practice Christ instilled. This general point recurs in the rest of the New

Testament: “*The religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world,*” James writes (1: 27). Religion is intimately connected with our life in the world, and in particular with all our daily relationships with others, especially with those in need. Let us resolve to subject every aspect of our lives to the dominion of God and his holy will. This we do above all by entering into union with Jesus Christ and following him in everything, whatever be the cost. The “Kingdom of God,” the “Kingdom of Heaven” is found pre-eminently in him. In him dwells the fullness of the godhead bodily, and by entering into union with him and living in union with him in all aspects of our life, God’s kingdom or rule is established. Let us beware of the perennial danger of separating religion from life, of regarding religion as the business of God, while viewing daily life as a different business again. No! Not at all. Jesus Christ is Lord, the Lord of *all*.

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Second reflection:

God's choice In everyday life opportunities come our way and consequences flow from our responses to them. A young man is dating with a fine young woman whom perhaps he does not adequately appreciate. He suddenly decides to bring the relationship to an end. Consequences will flow from this — the girl leaves him and finds someone else whom in due course she marries. He will never be able to start again with her, and perhaps he will never find another like her. It may even come to pass that he never finds a spouse. It is not quite the same with God. There are always consequences that flow from our actions, but at every point during this life we can start again with God. St Paul assures us that “*God never takes back his gifts or revokes his choice*” (Romans 11). If we have failed God and disobeyed him (which of course we have), nevertheless we can repent and start again knowing that God's choice of us stands. St Paul tells us elsewhere that *before the foundation of the world God chose us, chose us in Christ to be holy and full of love in his sight*. God's

choice of us to belong to him is an everlasting choice with its origins in eternity, and the gift that accompanied and constituted this choice is that of being “*in Christ*.” We are incorporated into him, and this gift is the source of all the other heavenly gifts we can enjoy. St Paul tells us in one of his Letters that in Christ we receive every heavenly blessing.

Every day, then, let us remind ourselves that whatever be our response to God and his gifts, God never takes back his gifts nor revokes his choice. So then, now I begin! The path to holiness in Christ is before me.



Tuesday of the thirty-first week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 38 (37):22-23 Forsake me not, O Lord, my God; be not far from me! Make haste and come to my help, O Lord, my strong salvation!

Collect Almighty and merciful God, by whose gift your faithful offer you right and praiseworthy service, grant, we pray, that we may hasten without stumbling to receive the things you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Philippians 2:5-11; Psalm 22:26b-32;
Luke 14:15-24

When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, “Blessed are those who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.” Jesus replied: “A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’

“But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, ‘I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.’ “Another said, ‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.’ “Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’ “The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’ “ ‘Sir,’ the servant said, ‘what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.’ “Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.’” (Luke 14:15-24)

Hell Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988) was a great Swiss theologian and priest (incardinated into the Diocese of Chur) who was nominated by Pope John Paul II to be a Cardinal of the Church — dying a few days before his investiture. He is considered one of the most important

theologians of the 20th century, and was a friend and a favoured theologian of Pope Benedict XVI — himself an eminent theologian of his age. Balthasar is well known for his multi-volume systematics which is divided into three parts: *The Glory of the Lord*, *Theo-Drama*, *Theo-Logic*, and a brief Epilogue. I mention this simply as part of his accomplishments as a towering theologian. One of his controversial positions was the possibility that all people have been and will be saved (*Dare We Hope That All Men Be Saved?* Ignatius Press). Balthasar's position may be briefly summarized as follows. Both Scripture and Tradition testify to God's desire to save all mankind. "*God our Saviour...desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*" (1 Tim 2:4). Anticipating his suffering and death, Jesus proclaims, "*Now is the judgment of this world,...when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself*" (Jn 12:31). "*God has consigned all men to disobedience that he may have mercy upon all*" (Rom 11:32; see also 2 Pet 3:9; Titus 2:11; Rom 5:14-21; Eph. 1:10; Col 1:20). The gift of salvation, accomplished

in Jesus Christ, is freely offered to each creature. However, as a gift of love, salvation must be freely accepted. God refuses to overrule or violate human freedom. As Scripture attests, the consequence of a rejection of God's offer of love is eternal separation from God, i.e., Hell. Those who have rejected Christ are accountable for their actions and they will be cast into "*the outer darkness*," or "*the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels*" (Mt 25:30ff.; see also Mt 5:22,29; 8:12; 10:28; 2 Pet 2:4-10; 3:7; Rev 19:20f.). However, we do not know that any man or woman has in fact finally rejected God. Thus, while recognizing the real possibility of Hell, Balthazar maintained that we may dare to hope that all men attain salvation.

Balthazar is not the only theologian who has thought that we may reasonably hope that all will be saved. Let us also note that in sections 45-47 of Pope Benedict XVI's 2007 encyclical *Spe Salvi* there are relevant comments. He writes that "*There can be people who have totally destroyed their desire for truth and readiness to love,*

people for whom everything has become a lie, people who have lived for hatred and have suppressed all love within themselves. This is a terrifying thought, but alarming profiles of this type can be seen in certain figures of our own history. In such people all would be beyond remedy and the destruction of good would be irrevocable: this is what we mean by the word Hell.” On the other hand, he continues, *“For the great majority of people — we may suppose — there remains in the depths of their being an ultimate interior openness to truth, to love, to God. In the concrete choices of life, however, it is covered over by ever new compromises with evil — much filth covers purity, but the thirst for purity remains and it still constantly re-emerges from all that is base and remains present in the soul.”* So the Pope supposed that “the great majority of people” would be saved. I venture to suggest that most of those who accept revealed truth would think this because of the might of God’s mercy. However, also I suggest (against Balthazar) that it is going too far to expect, on the same basis, that *all men are and will be saved*. After all,

God loved each of the angels that he created with an infinite love, and yet many are now damned because of their decision to defy him. Why could it not be that, similarly, many of the human family may not attain to salvation because of their deliberate choices? At the time of his announcement of the Eucharist at Capernaum, Christ already referred to Judas as “a devil” (John 6:70), despite Christ’s choice of him. At the Last Supper, Christ said of his disciples that “none of them is lost *but the son of perdition*, that the Scripture might be fulfilled” (John 17:12). All of this brings us to our Gospel parable today, which concludes with the words, “*I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet*” (Luke 14:15-24).

The point here is this. God’s merciful love and power are infinite. We have been created, sustained and redeemed because of his mercy. But we have the awesome power to sin and to reject God. Eve ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That is, it was a specific and definite action. But it involved something

vast: the choice to be “*like God, knowing good and evil*” (Genesis 3:5) — deciding for herself what was good and bad. The concrete act involved a rejection of God. She and Adam, the Church’s Tradition is confident, were saved, but damnation is a real possibility, and if we die (which can happen suddenly) in un-repented mortal sin, this will happen. How terrible! Let it not be thus!



Wednesday of the thirty-first week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 38 (37):22-23 Forsake me not, O Lord, my God; be not far from me! Make haste and come to my help, O Lord, my strong salvation!

Collect Almighty and merciful God, by whose gift your faithful offer you right and praiseworthy service, grant, we pray, that we may hasten without stumbling to receive the things you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Philippians 2:12-18; Psalm 27:1, 4, 13-14;
Luke 14:25-33

Large crowds were travelling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even life itself—such a person cannot be my disciple. “And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. “Suppose one of you

wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.' "Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Won't he first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples. (Luke 14:25-33)

Planning the work

Things don't "just happen."

A bird flies past, and it has some twig or stuffing in its beak — it is heading towards the nest that it is building. The bird, of course, has not paused to plan the building of the nest — it can't "plan" anything. It acts on instinct, and its instinct carries it along in the work of building the nest. In a sense, the bird *itself* has not *worked* at it. Rather, it is

the *instinct* with which it has been endowed that leads the bird along in the work. Its instinct is working itself out. Still, a “work” is being done, in the sense that the nest does not “just happen.” Behind it all, the Creator is working, and there is a plan. The tree sprouts, grows, and over the many decades becomes a large tree, living for centuries and serving various purposes in the larger scheme of things. All across the animal and plant domains, a great “work” is going on, driven by the ordered structure and nature with its laws given to things by their Creator, who sustains all. Everything has its pattern of activity, its plan, and those patterns make for the due development of things according to their measure. Things don’t “just happen.” Indeed, man constantly intervenes in the processes of nature in order to make things work even better — and according to his plan. Thus there is technology, applying the laws of nature to better and higher uses, so as to attain better “work.” One of the temptations of man, who is manifestly the lord of the world, is to think that things will just happen. That is, man can be lazy. When God created man, he made him in his

own image, “*after our own likeness*” (Genesis 1:26). The first thing this meant was dominion: “*let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over every creeping thing*” (1:26). It involved the mission to “*fill the earth and subdue it*” (1:28) — and this required work. Things were not going to “just happen.” Work did not spring from the Original Fall of man. When created, man was set to work. What the Fall did was to make of work not only a great joy (which it remains) but a source of great suffering too. The point being made here, though, is that things were not meant to “just happen.” This law of work by which the world and man would develop and attain fulfilment, remains.

It is man’s glory, reflecting the life of the Creator, that he can see what should be done, and then plan to bring it about. He aspires to marry and have a family — well, he must plan and work at it. Even if circumstances conspire to make the project very difficult, he ought work at it. Even if he fails in certain respects, his working at it for the right reason will make of him a better person. He will have

become more of a man precisely because of his dutiful and worthwhile work, even if that work has not had (for various reasons) great success. But normally, the work will prosper to a point precisely because of his plan and his efforts. And so the world flourishes. Now, there are some projects which are immensely important, so important that *every person* is called to work at them. They can never be allowed, as it were, to “just happen.” Indeed, God has commanded that we all work at them, might and main. I am referring, of course, to the work of *loving God with our whole mind, heart, soul and strength*. On one occasion our Lord was asked what is the first commandment of the Law, and he answered instantly. It is the command to love God with our whole being and our neighbour as ourselves. But this will not “just happen.” We have to work at it every day, and keep up the work constantly. All this brings us to our Gospel today (Luke 14:25-33), in which our Lord tells us the parable of the man who had to build the tower, and of the king who was at war with another king. “*Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won’t you first sit down*

and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it?” Again, “Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Won’t he first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand?”

That is to say, you must count the cost, plan carefully, and work at it systematically. So it is in the work of following Jesus Christ, of being his disciple. This is absolutely necessary in the Christian life, because Christ demands one’s whole heart. It is no light undertaking being a Catholic Christian. It requires the strong execution of a plan of life.

If one is to grow in the love of Christ and live a life consistent with this goal, one must not think it will “just happen.” One must sit down, count the cost, plan carefully with the Church’s best advice, using all the help of grace available from the Church’s ministry, and then work at loving Christ with all one’s heart, according to the plan. It is the work not of a day, but of a lifetime, but every day counts. Let us take up the work, beginning now, for who

knows — this day the demand may be made for our soul,
and what then?



Thursday of the thirty-first week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 38 (37):22-23 Forsake me not, O Lord, my God; be not far from me! Make haste and come to my help, O Lord, my strong salvation!

Collect Almighty and merciful God, by whose gift your faithful offer you right and praiseworthy service, grant, we pray, that we may hasten without stumbling to receive the things you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Philippians 3:3-8; Ps. 104; Luke 15:1-10

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them. Then Jesus told them this parable: Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he

joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. (Luke 15:1-10)

God and sin The first thing which this passage conveys to us is the impression which Jesus gave to “the tax collectors and sinners.” We read that “*all the tax collectors and sinners were drawing near (eggizontes) to Jesus to hear him.*” So we are not speaking of just a few of this class that was so despised and avoided by the religious professionals and by many others who wished to avoid the

way of sinners. Jesus gave an unambiguous impression, a plain message by his whole manner, that he was very happy to have “all” these undesirables about his Person. There was no doubt in the minds of “all” these “sinners” that they were welcome to come to him, and they did indeed come to him and they listened to him eagerly. Not only were they feeling uninhibitedly drawn to hear him, but they were dining with him — perhaps in a house, perhaps outside in public where Christ may have been speaking. Perhaps food was being passed around during something of a break. Some of them may have been seated next to or in front of Christ, handing him a loaf, or a little fish — perhaps our Lord himself was handing food to them while eating with them himself. We remember how after his resurrection he made breakfast for his disciples on the shore of the Lake of Tiberius, and handed them something to eat (John 21:13). Christ’s gaze, his smile, his tone of voice to each and all of them, his ever-present sovereign assurance and his spiritual and moral authority, made of him an incomparable haven for “all the tax collectors and

sinner” — perhaps troubled by their own spiritual state and vaguely yearning for communion with God. They loved to be with him, so holy though he was. The scene of the holy prophet with such powers as he exercised being surrounded by such a despicable mob as this, was surely something of a sensation. The sight of the situation shocked the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. Doubtlessly too, it upset their notion of right religious order, and appeared to break down the form of ostracism which they promoted and which, in their view, protected the religious and moral ethos of the nation. It was yet another instance of the overturn of their system which, in their benighted eyes, Jesus of Nazareth was causing.

Their objection, then, was not against “all the tax collectors and sinners,” but against *him*. They were muttering among themselves at the scandal: this man is actually welcoming sinners, and going so far as to eat with them! Our Lord, of course, instantly knew what was clouding their hearts and so he explained not just his own actions, but himself — and all of heaven. As ever, our

Lord had recourse to everyday life. On one occasion he was attacked by the synagogue official for healing in the Synagogue and on the Sabbath: “healing” was “work,” and so to heal on the Sabbath was a violation of its sacred rest. Our Lord masterfully replied, *“Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?”* (Luke 13:15-16). So too, on this occasion, our Lord points to everyday life as an analogy: *“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’”* God, too — and therefore he whom God has sent to speak and act on his behalf — seeks out the lost and rejoices to reclaim them. All of heaven rejoices: *“I tell you*

that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.” The Pharisees and the teachers of the law have an entirely mistaken notion of the attitude and the action of God towards sinners. God looks to the sinner with immense interest and compassion, desiring to draw him back to his love. So the first thing which Christ teaches us in our passage today (Luke 15: 1 10) is that God loves the sinner, while hating the sin (from which he wishes to draw the sinner away). God is the refuge of the sinner, provided the sinner regrets his sin and wishes to be rid of it. Christ shows “all the tax collectors and sinners” that he, and God whom he reveals, is their true happiness.

But especially decisive is Christ’s call to repentance. This is the special desire of the whole of heaven. *“In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”* Repentance is the call and the need of all. The serious sinner must repent of his serious sin, for his eternal

salvation is at stake. The one on the way to holiness must repent of his deliberate venial sins if he is to advance to the heights. Everything turns on repentance at every point of life's journey to God. Once we refuse to repent of a known sin, no matter how slight it may seem in our sight, progress is stalled. Let us then resolve to embark on a life-long and daily pattern of repentance. Now, then, I begin!

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Second reflection: (Luke 15:1-10)

“There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one repentant sinner”

It has been said that while youth is the time of great hopes, maturity is the time of regrets. This may be the case in terms of what people at different stages of their lives tend to do, but that ought not be the end of the matter. Just as the idealism of youth has to be assisted with prudence, so the regrets that come with extended experience can be transformed by the great prospects always ahead. That is to say, regrets can be transformed into life-giving repentance. At whatever stage of life we choose to take stock and begin again, we ought remember who the God is in whose hands lie all our prospects. He is a God of love who always pursues us with his offer of mercy. Our Lord tells us in our Gospel today (Luke 15: 1-10) that God is like the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine in the wilderness and goes after the one who is straying until he finds it. If there are many things a person regrets as he

looks back, let him look on his regrets as a sign that God has begun to reclaim him with love. St Paul tells us elsewhere that nothing can come between us and the love that God has for us. Our Lord gives us another parallel. God is like the woman who finds the drachma she has lost, and she rejoices in her find (Luke 15: 1-10). Being found by God and brought back to union with him is something that transforms mere regrets into joy and hope for the future. Indeed, as our Lord tells us in the Gospel passage, it is a joy and a hope possessed by God and all in heaven.

Let us be striving for continual repentance, weekly, daily. Our repentance ought be a repentance from deliberate venial sin and from all lack of generosity with God. God is seeking to bring us back from the daily pathway of sin, for if we continue to follow it, holiness will be impossible. Our regrets will be nothing more than regrets. By the grace of God let us transform regrets into repentance, with the joy it brings.



Friday of the thirty-first week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 38 (37):22-23 Forsake me not, O Lord, my God; be not far from me! Make haste and come to my help, O Lord, my strong salvation!

Collect Almighty and merciful God, by whose gift your faithful offer you right and praiseworthy service, grant, we pray, that we may hasten without stumbling to receive the things you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Philippians 3:17-4:1; Psalm 121;
Luke 16:1-8

Jesus told his disciples: There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. So he called him in and asked him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer.' The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do now? My master is taking away

my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg-I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses.' So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' 'Eight hundred gallons of olive oil,' he replied. The manager told him, 'Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it four hundred.' Then he asked the second, 'And how much do you owe?' 'A thousand bushels of wheat,' he replied. He told him, 'Take your bill and make it eight hundred.' The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light.

(Luke 16:1-8)

Good work St John Henry Newman's younger brother Charles — the second of the six Newman children and one year younger than John Henry — was, like the rest of his family, intelligent. However, he led a hopeless, forlorn life, and this was predicted by his father who said that Charles would never make his way. As we would say

colloquially, he was never able to get his act together. His younger brother Francis did well in life, though his religious history was strange and entirely disappointing. His older brother John Henry (1801-1890) emerged as the greatest religious mind of England in his time, one of the best English prose writers, was beatified for the holiness of his life by Pope Benedict XVI in 2010, and canonized by Pope Francis in 2019. Some people do poorly, others do well. People may do poorly in some things, while in other things they may do well. Alexander the Great was a soaring military conqueror as was Julius Caesar, but, to say the very least, neither did well in the moral realm. Napoleon Bonaparte was a military and administrative powerhouse. But in view of the enormous loss of life he caused and the devastation to the Church, one can understand why George Bernard Shaw once said, with his usual wit, that it would have been better if he had never been born. These great men remind us of the recurring theme of success and failure, of good and bad work, and of true achievement. The doing of “good work” is distinctive

of man and his calling. The animal senses no call to do things well — its actions are the fruit of instinct. The human being does his “work,” but he can choose not to work. If he chooses to work or to work well, consequences flow from this choice. Again, in choosing to work, he can work for a variety of motives. Characteristically and by nature, he experiences the call to work and to work well. It is one of the most fundamental aspirations of the human person — to work, and to work well, to do good work. The question, though, is not simply whether one is prepared to work and work well. Just as important is the question of *what* work one *ought* to set out to do in life. We are endowed with the power of choice enabling us to choose to work well, and to choose the *kind* of work with deliberation, wisdom and with a moral sense.

Countless instances in life and human history come to mind of people who have worked well and successfully in their chosen paths. Various societies have attained notable achievements. We think of the culture and, say, the pyramids of Egypt. We think of the literature and

philosophy and political system of Greece. We think of the administrative and military achievements of the Roman Empire. All of this we may take as symbolized by the biblical story of the building of Babel. We read in the inspired text that *“as men migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, ‘Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.’ And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth”*” (Genesis 11: 2-4). Babel came to grief because of arrogance and independence from God (Genesis 11: 6-9). But the high aim, to build a tower with its top in the heavens, can be taken as a symbol of the human ambition driving so many of the achievements of man and society. In our Gospel passage today, our Lord does not comment on the profoundly flawed character of much of human effort and work. Rather, he refers to the temporal efforts and

achievements of man in order to comment on the lack of effort and foresight of those who have the benefit of divine revelation. They are well aware of the final destination of man, and of what man's best and lasting work consists in. Man's best work is to attain his heavenly homeland — not by the skin of his teeth, as it were, but by God's grace with flying colours. Good work in an eternal sense is to have attained the place God has intended for us from all eternity. In one scene of the Gospel, James and John approach our Lord to ask for places at his right and left in his kingdom. Our Lord replied that they belong to those to whom they have been allotted by his heavenly Father. Man's best work is to attain that place allotted to him. All our energies and our best understanding ought be applied to achieving that goal.

In our Gospel today, our Lord laments the fact that so many of the “children of light” fail miserably in application and understanding in attaining what they know to be to their best advantage — holiness and heaven. *“For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their*

own kind than are the people of the light” (Luke 16: 1-8). Let us set our goals carefully in life. They ought be the goals of Christ. Our plan of life ought be the plan of God for us. As St Paul writes, *this is the will of God, your sanctification.* The one thing necessary, to which we ought apply all our powers day by day, is to attain holiness.

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Second reflection: The apostolate Especially since the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Church has insisted on the distinctive character of the ministerial priesthood. The ministerial priesthood is essentially different from the universal priesthood of all Christ’s faithful. Nevertheless, the universal priesthood of all the baptized is immensely important for the Church and the world, and must be appreciated and constantly lived if God’s saving plan is to have its effect. All the faithful are called, in their own fashion, to share in Christ’s priestly work of offering sacrifices to the Father and of being, in Christ, a mediator between God and man. Their whole life and work with its

fruits are the spiritual sacrifice which they offer as members of Christ. St Paul makes a remark in the Letter to the Romans that throws light on this matter. He has, he writes, his work of *“performing the priestly duty of bringing the Good News from God to the pagans”*. By means of the preaching of the Gospel he makes *“them acceptable as an offering, made holy by the Holy Spirit”* (Romans 15:16). So that is a priestly work. The laity by their share in it, in their measure and according to their own vocation, share in a priestly work. This they do by bringing the Good News to those around them in the world. In this way they, too, are priests of Jesus Christ and share in preparing a holy offering to God. Being apostolic is a priestly work. Let us all, whatever be our vocation, strive by our daily work and apostolic activity to prepare a holy offering to God our Father in union with our High Priest his only Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Holiness is the acceptable offering to God. So let us live in holiness ourselves and bring the holiness of Christ to all around us.



Saturday of the thirty-first week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 38 (37):22-23 Forsake me not, O Lord, my God; be not far from me! Make haste and come to my help, O Lord, my strong salvation!

Collect Almighty and merciful God, by whose gift your faithful offer you right and praiseworthy service, grant, we pray, that we may hasten without stumbling to receive the things you have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Philippians 4:10-19; Psalm 111;

Luke 16:9-15

Jesus said, I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling

worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money. The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight. (Luke 16:9-15)

God and money The Church in her teaching cannot accept an intent by the state to prevent private ownership and to control the entire administration of material goods. In response to the evils of rampant capitalism and the *laissez-faire* (i.e., a refusal to interfere) policy of the state towards those who owned the means of production during the Industrial Revolution, Friedrich Engels (1820-1895), when in Manchester, wrote his influential first book, *The Condition of the Working Class*

in England in 1844. The book was written between September 1844 and March 1845 and was printed in German in 1845. In the book, Engels expressed his views on the “grim future of capitalism and the industrial age”, and described in detail, street after street, the total squalor in which the working people of Manchester were living. He produced with Karl Marx *The Communist Manifesto* (February, 1848), and later supported Marx financially to do research and write the *Das Kapital*. Karl Marx published Volume 1 of his *Kapital* in 1867, proposing that the motivating force of capitalism lies in the exploitation of labour, whose unpaid work is the ultimate source of profit. The work draws on Hegel’s dialectical method, and its second and third volumes were edited by Engels following Marx’s death in 1883. Marx and Engels were major (though not the only) influences in the rise of modern socialism, the extremes of which dictated that the means of production must be commonly owned and controlled cooperatively. The purported purpose of this was so that those in need could be adequately protected. No

importance nor recognition was given to private ownership. This has now been utterly discredited. The right, the ability and even the duty of each individual (unless freely set aside by him) to own and administer temporal goods must be appreciated and allowed. Man should be allowed to acquire, own and use the things of this world, so as freely to attain his proper end. If this is denied him, it will be virtually an imprisonment. But, of course, as the situation which gave rise to socialist theories and movements showed, the right to own the things of this world can be grossly abused.

That is looking at the matter of ownership primarily from the angle of its bearing on society. If we do not get this right, society will be profoundly disrupted and sundered. But there is a deeper side to it, and it bears on man's salvation. The fact is that while every man has the right to own things and to use them to attain his proper end, he, fallen as he is, can very easily become profoundly attached to material things, even becoming their slave. His call is to a supreme attachment to God in love and

obedience, but the danger is that he can so easily come to love the creatures which God provides for him. He can prefer to become rich in this world's goods rather than rich in God's love. In seeking to ensure his security in this world with adequate food, clothing, shelter and other necessary measures, he can slide into seeking his total security in the things of this world. The life of love is gradually snuffed out, and God is forgotten and Self takes his place. This is the danger of wealth and possessions. We must keep before us the fact that our possessions are God's gifts, that they are constantly sustained by the creative hand of God, and that he extends them to us for one purpose: to do his holy will. This includes, of course, our wellbeing here on earth, and that of our fellow-man. So we must have a care to our own material security, that of those for whom we are directly responsible, and for the poor and those in need. So it is that our Lord tells us in our Gospel passage today: *"I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings."* We must use our

material possessions not only to help ourselves, but those in spiritual and material need. The constant danger is an excessive attachment to temporal goods. Our Lord issues his dire warning: *“No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money. The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God’s sight”* (Luke 16: 9-15).

Our spiritual aim ought be so to be detached from our material goods as to be poor in spirit. Our spirit ought be poor in material attachments and rich in communion with God. St Thomas More possessed a well-furnished home and property befitting his station in life, but he was poor and detached in spirit — and this was demonstrated in so many ways. Christ has told us that if we are poor in spirit we shall be sure heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 5). If we carry within us a love for lands, houses, fields

and treasures of coin, how can we preserve a heart filled with the desire for God? “*For where your treasure is, there your heart is also*” (Matthew 6: 21). As our Lord says in today’s Gospel, we *cannot be a slave of both God and money*.

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Second reflection:

The call of all During the first four centuries the Church grew largely because of the apostolic spirit of the ordinary laity. They show that the little person has great importance in the saving plan of God for the world. We, too, in due course will be mere names. Our lives will have passed and little record of us will be present. But God will know. Our lives every day are hastening towards their end. All that will matter then will be the degree to which we have given over our lives to Christ and his Revelation. We need to have faith in him and true conviction as to the truth of the Gospel. What we must do, though, is be lovingly dedicated to it in the work God has placed before us in life.

The time will come for our Lord to speak of us to his heavenly Father. He will do this if our names are found written in the Book of life.



Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 88 (87):3 Let my prayer come into your presence. Incline your ear to my cry for help, O Lord.

Collect Almighty and merciful God, graciously keep from us all adversity, so that, unhindered in mind and body alike, we may pursue in freedom of heart the things that are yours. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Wisdom 6:12-16; Psalm 63:2-8;
1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 or 4: 13-14; Matthew 25:1-13

Jesus said, At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in

coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' 'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. Later the others also came. 'Sir! Sir!' they said. 'Open the door for us!' But he replied, 'I tell you the truth, I don't know you.' Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour. (Matthew 25:1-13)

“The bridegroom is here!” In the Old Testament God refers to himself as Israel's *Husband*. Israel, his chosen people, is his *spouse* by his deliberate and loving choice. Time and again the prophets preach that the chosen people are acting as an unfaithful spouse. Our Lord took over this inspired expression and calls himself the

Bridegroom. This was a step unparalleled among the prophets of Israel. Calling himself this indirectly suggested that he occupied the place of Yahweh the Husband of Israel — it was yet another allusion to his unique status, indeed to his being equal to God. The new people of God which Christ was founding on the basis of the Twelve was his spiritual spouse. Christ is the Bridegroom, the Church is his spouse. I am not aware of any other ancient people who understood their deity as not only their Lord but their Husband. I think it is a unique designation, and special to the Revealed Religion of the Hebrews and then appropriated by Jesus Christ to himself as the very Object of revealed religion. For instance, Islam reveres its founder Mahomet as the greatest prophet, but no more than this. Allah — and certainly not Mahomet — is seen as the object of his life. Further, even in respect to God, the Muslim does not understand Allah as Bridegroom to Islam. He is nothing other than ineffable Master and Lord. The Catholic Church, following the teaching of her divine Founder, looks on Christ as both her Lord and

Bridegroom — her mystical Spouse. The Church *loves* Christ himself and sees him as her *love* and the object of her whole life and ministry. Our bond with him takes precedence over all other bonds, whether they be family or social. Christ himself is the centre of the whole of Christian life because he is our God and our Redeemer. He is the only way to the Father — no-one comes to the Father but through him. Indeed, in seeing him we see the Father. Eternal life consists in knowing the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. Let us cultivate a profound appreciation of the revealed plan of God. By his death and resurrection, Christ has become the Bridegroom of the Church, of which we are members. As such, we share his life by grace, and it is thus that we are redeemed and sanctified.

There is a corollary to this. It relates to a certain calling in the life of the Church. In his parable in today's Gospel our Lord speaks of the sudden arrival of the bridegroom. At midnight there was a cry, "*The bridegroom is here! Go out and meet him*" (Matthew 25: 1-13). These words are quoted by *The Catechism of the*

Catholic Church in its discussion of those who choose a life of celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. This is what the *Catechism* says: “*From the very beginning of the Church there have been men and women who have renounced the great good of marriage to follow the Lamb wherever he goes, to be intent on the things of the Lord, to seek to please him, and to go out to meet the Bridegroom who is coming. Christ himself has invited certain persons to follow him in this way of life, of which he remains the model*” (no.1618). It is a beautiful thing to find a spouse and to marry, and the Church celebrates it. But the Church teaches that it is a still nobler calling to have Christ as one’s exclusive spouse. In thinking of Christ the Bridegroom, we not only think of the spousal relationship between Christ and his body the Church. We think also of the vocation of some members of the Church to live, in faith, an exclusive and spousal relationship with Christ. Countless numbers of the Church’s faithful in the past, and very many now, receive from our Lord the invitation to belong to him exclusively. Their privilege is to forego

marriage for something much greater, which is to belong to Christ himself. It is a special gift, a special grace, a special charism. Instead of an earthly spouse, they have in their hearts a heavenly One here and now, day by day. Its basis is a vigorous and lively faith, and we remember what our Lord said to the doubting Thomas: “*Blessed are those who do not see and yet believe.*” The Church teaches that this is a worthier, nobler and more beautiful vocation than that of marriage. The Church, God’s family, is stronger as a result of the flourishing of such vocations. It is a great blessing for a young person to receive such a calling, and a great blessing for the parents of such a one. The vocation to consecrated celibacy, whether in the priesthood or some form of dedicated Christian or religious life, ought to be prayed for. Let us pray that many with this calling will come forth from the Church, including each diocese and parish.

Whatever be our particular vocation, the fundamental thing is that by faith and baptism we are in Jesus Christ. We are in him as he is in the Father, and this by the gift and

power of the Holy Spirit. In the inspired Scriptures, the earthly image of this union of all Christians with Christ is marriage, the spousal love between husband and wife. The bond between Christ and his Church is spousal. We who live in the state of grace are caught up and live in this bond. Let us wonder at it, contemplate it, and let us cultivate it. Let us be ever faithful to it and never soil it by deliberate sin. Sin is infidelity to this spousal calling. Our love is for the Bridegroom. He is our life and our flourishing.

Suggested Reading: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*
1618-1620 (Virginity for the Kingdom)



Monday of the thirty-second week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 88 (87):3 Let my prayer come into your presence. Incline your ear to my cry for help, O Lord.

Collect Almighty and merciful God, graciously keep from us all adversity, so that, unhindered in mind and body alike, we may pursue in freedom of heart the things that are yours. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Titus 1:1-9; Psalm 23; Luke 17:1-6

Jesus said to his disciples, “Things that cause sin will inevitably occur, but woe to the one through whom they occur. It would be better for him if a millstone were put around his neck and he be thrown into the sea than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he wrongs you seven times in one day and

returns to you seven times saying, 'I am sorry,' you should forgive him." And the Apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith." The Lord replied, "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." (Luke 17:1-6)

Sin There are some fundamental features of reality and human life which have exercised the mind of man for centuries upon centuries, and which are both important and fascinating. One, of course, is the question of the Absolute, the Ultimate, the Origin, the Source of all things, seen and unseen. The voice of mankind is virtually unanimous in recognizing the reality of the unseen Power or powers — the Deity, or deities. Whether there is one God or many has always been contested, with the weight of belief decisively falling to there being many. Belief in but one God is unusual. Again — what is God *like*? The nature of God or the gods has likewise lacked human consensus. Apart from questions of theodicy, another fundamental issue in thought and culture has been the question of right

and *good action* — the good life. Is man obligated to do certain things, independent of their usefulness or expediency? What *should* man do, and why is he so obligated? In our modern secular age, in which God is not accepted as an agreed, objective Fact grounding reality and truth, there nevertheless is no disputing that society insists on various moral obligations. At this point, for instance, the rights of children are regarded as sacrosanct. Child pornography, child sexual exploitation, child forced labour, child military conscription, are all regarded, fortunately, as abominable — though, strangely, the sacrosanct rights of *unborn* children are denied. But what is the foundation of these basic rights? The foundation is the natural law. There is a law springing from nature, a natural law that can be easily recognized by all and which societies know they must recognize by binding legislation. The conscience of man apprehends these natural rights and recognizes the duty of man to respect them. All recognize that man has a right to his life unless his actions have so heinously violated the fundamental right of others as to attract a

capital punishment for them. A party or society may not engage in crimes against humanity, nor may any individual — and if found guilty, sanctions will be imposed on those who violate this law. Now, what is also of interest is that this natural law that obliges moral behaviour is often perceived as of divine origin. It manifests the will of God or the gods. What I am here referring to is the *sense*, not merely of wrongdoing or crime, but *of sin*.

Sophocles, in his *Antigone*, first performed in 441 B.C., recognises that human laws are subject to a higher divine law. In the dialogue between Creon and Antigone, Creon the king of Thebes demands to know why Antigone did not obey his order. Antigone replies: “*because I did not believe that Zeus was the one who had proclaimed it; neither did Justice, or the gods of the dead whom Justice lives among. The laws they have made for men are well marked out. I didn’t suppose your decree had strength enough for you, who are human, to violate the lawful traditions which the gods have not merely written, but made infallible. These laws are not for now or for*

yesterday, they are alive forever; and no one knows when they were shown to us first. I did not intend to pay, before the gods, for breaking these laws because of my fear of one man and his principles. I was thoroughly aware I would die before you proclaimed it; of course I would die, even if you hadn't. Since I will die, and early, I call this profit. Anyone who lives the troubled life I do must benefit from death." Antigone is saying that it is better to follow the natural law and be punished for it by man, than to follow the law of man and be punished for it by God (Zeus). We have here a classical, pagan (Greek) recognition of the natural moral law and of its essential connection with the divine. Here there is expressed, in effect, a sense of the objective fact of sin. *Sin* must be avoided. Now, one of the most distinctive things about Revealed Religion — the religion the One God revealed to his chosen people — is the great prominence of the teaching, not only that there is but one God and that there is an objective moral law which he has imposed (in the Ten Commandments), but that *sin* is horrible in his sight. *Sin* must be avoided. *Be holy, for I*

am holy, says the Lord — this is the pulsating theme of Revealed Religion. It is especially prominent in the teaching of Jesus Christ. While Greek and classical thought recognized the natural law and, to a point, sin, it is supremely and consistently present in the Revelation of Jesus Christ. Sin is the surpassing abomination. While Christ was merciful, he said, “*go now, and sin no more!*”

In our Gospel passage today, our Lord is especially trenchant about sin and about those who lead others to sin: “*Things that cause sin will inevitably occur, but woe to the one through whom they occur. It would be better for him if a millstone were put around his neck and he be thrown into the sea than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him*” (Luke 17:1-6). Sin is the worst thing in the world, and it was to take away the sin of the world that the Son of God became man. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world by his one Sacrifice of himself on Calvary. Before he ascended into heaven he charged the Church with the mission to bring the

forgiveness of sins to the world. This is a principal mission of the Church. Let us take steps to have our sins forgiven, and let us do all we can to avoid sin, never leading others to sin but rather to the all-holy God.

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Second reflection: (Luke 17:1-6)

“Obstacles are sure to come, but alas for the one who provides them!” A danger which lies before the one who has embarked on any project is that of weariness in the face of the obstacles that are sure to come. A young couple get married and their intention is to found a family together. Obstacles are sure to arise, stemming from within them and outside of them. Or again, a person sets out on establishing a business; he knows that most small businesses fail and that therefore obstacles are sure to arise. Beyond the sphere of one’s own personal life, there is the life of society and the life of nations. Again, obstacles are sure to arise. The twentieth century was dominated by the terrible tragedies of Nazism, Fascism, Communism, greedy

and excessive Capitalism, and many other systems. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, societies were faced with murderous terrorism. The danger will be that of *giving in* to the weariness that accompanies obstacles. Our Lord tells his disciples in today's Gospel passage (Luke 17: 1-6) that "*obstacles are sure to come.*" Our Lord is referring to the obstacles that lead a person away from life in him, and from obedience to God's commandments. We must keep alive a constant spiritual readiness to resist such obstacles and all weariness attendant on them. Especially must we be vigilant lest we ourselves become obstacles to the spiritual flourishing of others, through our carelessness and mediocrity in the fulfilment of our daily duties.

Let us resolve to maintain a living and growing faith in God and Christ, and making of this faith a very practical matter. In this way we shall grow spiritually amid the inevitable difficulties and obstacles, and be increasingly careful not to be a source of obstacles to others.



Tuesday of the thirty-second week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 88 (87):3 Let my prayer come into your presence. Incline your ear to my cry for help, O Lord.

Collect Almighty and merciful God, graciously keep from us all adversity, so that, unhindered in mind and body alike, we may pursue in freedom of heart the things that are yours. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Titus 2:1-8.11-14; Psalm 36; Luke 17:7-10

“Suppose one of you has a servant ploughing or looking after the sheep. Will he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, ‘Come along now and sit down to eat’? Won’t he rather say, ‘Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink’? Will he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when

you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty'."
(Luke 17:7-10)

Duty There have been a variety of approaches in working out a philosophy of the human person. What is man, fundamentally? Where are we to start in giving an account of man — as opposed, say, to his nearest “cousin” in the visible world, the animal? There is a standard, classical definition: man is a “rational animal.” This definition recognizes the obvious likenesses between man and the animal, especially the highly endowed animal. It places man in the animal class, but simultaneously denotes the feature which marks him off from all other animals: his rationality. He has *intellect*, he is an “animal” *with mind*. With this power to reason and understand, he possesses an equally important gift — the freedom to choose among the options that lie before him. He is not the subject and slave of his instincts, as is every other animal. That man is a *rational animal* is the most widespread and received definition of him, but there have been important variations

of this in emphasis. For instance, it has often been observed that in view of the almost universal prevalence of *religion* in human culture — allowing for the anomaly of modern Western secularism, agnosticism and atheism, and those cultures influenced by it — many have suggested that man is a “religious” animal. Of course, the religious instinct or sense is a feature of man’s rationality, but the mention of religion illustrates the variety of possible approaches to the understanding of man. John Henry Newman preferred to stress a different element of man’s rationality in his account of man’s basic structure: his conscience or sense of duty. For instance, during the widespread and lengthy debate in England following Charles Darwin’s publication of his work, *On the Origin of Species* in November 1859, Newman’s correspondence shows he had no theological or philosophical difficulty with Evolution as such. Evolution could have God as its author, as could a creation involving no evolution. Newman made an interesting observation. He said that he would allow an evolution of the animal (by God’s

sustaining hand, of course) up to the stage of rudimentary forms of what we might call “intellect.” What would mark the appearance (or creation) of man as such would be the presence of a “conscience,” or sense of duty.

There is no need to linger on the merits or otherwise of this proposal. It would require a careful statement of the meaning of intellect and rationality — especially in light of the discoveries of some remarkable things which some animals can do. But let us linger on Newman’s emphasis on the *conscience* and sense of *duty*, which is manifestly one fundamental feature of man’s rationality. Newman placed this very high among the basic endowments of man. Indeed, in his philosophy of man he makes it the natural foundation of the religious sense. While some might see the religious sense as distinguishing man, Newman takes the matter further and sees the “conscience” as the root, the principle and the sanction of religion in man. It is, he taught, a basic starting point in human experience that man perceives his duty. Human life, the life that is distinctive to man as such, starts there. So then, man’s flourishing

depends on his fulfilment of his duty, on his fidelity to his conscience. It is critical to man that he be alive to his duty and that he be fully disposed to fulfil it. If this is lacking in him, whatever be his intellectual and reasoning endowments, whatever be his power to choose, he will fail as a man and get nowhere. More, he could become an ogre if his moral life is dormant. There is this too. His conscience will not only keep before him his duty, but it will keep him humble in all that he does. It will teach him that he is a sinner, while urging him on in the doing of what his conscience dictates: and his conscience will sense that it is God who is calling him in it all. For Newman insists that there lies within man's conscience an implicit sense of the living, objective God. Let this general point of the fundamental importance of our sense of duty introduce us to our Lord's teaching in today's Gospel. We must strive through life to fulfil the will of God. This is our constant duty. But however well we may do this due to the assistance of his grace, we never have reason to boast of doing something "exceptional." It is no more than our

duty. “*Will he (the master) thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty’*” (Luke 17:7-10).

Let us strive to cultivate a sense of the sovereignty of God our loving Father. His will is our life, and nothing matters in comparison to the doing of it. That is our basic duty. If God’s will is done, all will be well, and if due to the gift of his grace we are blessed with doing it, then our gratitude ought be profound. The more we do God’s will, the more will our vision be clear enough to see how often we fail to do it. In any case, our attitude ought be, as our Lord explains, that “*we are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.*” Let us make the loving and grateful fulfilment of our duty a fundamental element of our daily life. It will lead to true life and flourishing.

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Second reflection:

Evil Day after day we read and see news of death and destruction. There are terrible natural disasters. There are disasters brought on man by his fellow man. Evil and death present a constant threat and struggle. St Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans that *sin entered the world through one man and with sin has come death, and death has spread through the whole human race*. In this he is repeating the teaching of the Old Testament — for example, in the Book of Wisdom. Wisdom tells us that *“God did make man imperishable, he made him in the image of his own nature; it was the devil’s envy that brought death into the world, as those who are his partners will discover”* (Wisdom 2:23-24). So let us look on the calamities and sufferings characteristic of life in our world as symptoms and reminders of someone and something more sinister and foreboding that lives and operates out of sight. Personal and moral evil is at the origin of the profound dysfunction rampant in the world. The devil did it once, and he is trying to do it again and again.

When we see suffering and evil let us resolve not to be “*partners*” of the one who initiated it. Let us in our hearts renounce sin and “*the devil’s envy.*” Let us resolutely pursue the path of the virtuous who “*are in the hands of God.*” The path of the virtuous is that of gold being tested in a furnace. God will accept such a one as a holocaust. Let us make our choice for God and, without compromise, live it out amid the difficulties that will surely come.



Wednesday of the thirty-second week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 88 (87):3 Let my prayer come into your presence. Incline your ear to my cry for help, O Lord.

Collect Almighty and merciful God, graciously keep from us all adversity, so that, unhindered in mind and body alike, we may pursue in freedom of heart the things that are yours. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Titus 3:1-7; Psalm 23:1b-6; Luke 17:11-19

Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus travelled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!” When he saw them, he said, “Go, show yourselves to the priests.” And as they went, they were cleansed. One of them, when he saw he was healed,

came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well." (Luke 17:11-19)

The Samaritan leper The special feature of our Gospel today is the grateful Samaritan. Let us contemplate him, with something of the history of his people in mind. The Samaritans viewed their own history with pride. According to their tradition, Mount Gerizim was the original holy place of the Israelites from the time of the arrival of the tribes of Israel under Joshua. We read in the Book of Deuteronomy that Moses instructed the people, *"when the Lord your God brings you into the land which you are entering to take possession of it, you shall set the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Ebal"* (11:29). He repeats the point later before the people: *"When you have passed over the Jordan, these shall stand upon Mount Gerizim, to bless the people..."* (27:12). The

Samaritans claimed that they were the true Israel. They had their place of worship on Mount Gerizim and claimed that it was the original sanctuary. They regarded their version of the Torah as the original and that of the Jews as a falsified text produced by Ezra during the Babylonian exile. According to the Samaritans, it was on Mount Gerizim that Abraham was commanded by God to offer Isaac, his son, as a sacrifice (Genesis 22:2). The Torah tells of Moses commanding the people to *“seek the place which the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there; thither you shall go, and thither you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices”* (Deuteronomy 12:5). Judaism took this to refer to Jerusalem, the Samaritans took it to refer to Mount Gerizim. The Christian knows that on some of these points the Samaritans were mistaken because Jesus Christ said so. In John 4:20, Christ converses with the Samaritan woman, who tells him that *“Our fathers worshipped on this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.”* Our

Lord's answer adjudicates the dispute: "*Woman ... you worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews*" (4:22). But there were numerous good people among them, and this is shown in the response of many of them to Christ.

The fact that the Samaritans were in error in holding out against Judaism did not affect our Lord's regard for many of them. It was precisely to this Samaritan woman that he gave a rare and precious revelation that he was the Messiah: "*The woman said to him, 'I know that the Messiah is coming... Jesus said to her, 'I who speak to you am he'*" (John 4:25-26). The result of our Lord's conversation with her was that many Samaritans of her village came to believe that Jesus was "*the Saviour of the world*" — a remarkable assent of faith (John 4:42). Moreover, John explicitly states that in the case of many of them this was a result of "*the woman's testimony*" (4:39) — doubtlessly pointing to the future effect of the testimony in Samaria of Christ's disciples, and the effect of the apostolic testimony of future Samaritans themselves. We remember

when our Lord was passing through Samaria on his way to Jerusalem, the particular village he reached refused him hospitality precisely because he was on his way to, as they deemed it, the heretical city. But our Lord's response was mild, gentle, accommodating — he simply turned aside with his disciples to stay elsewhere. We remember the famous parable addressed to the scribe who asked who is one's "neighbour". One's neighbour is anyone in need, and in the story it was precisely a Samaritan who exemplified the person who recognizes this. In the parable, the Good Samaritan was a better person than a couple of those who were officially the best of the Jews – the priest and the Levite. The Good Samaritan is now a figure in the thought of the world, symbolizing disinterested charity. Well then, all this brings us back to our scene of today (Luke 17:11-19), in which we have ten lepers huddled together in their pitiable ostracism. They had the faith to appeal to Jesus, and to believe his word. But it seems that they promptly forgot the Giver of the gift and went off delirious in their unexpected fortune. Not so the lone

Samaritan among them: *“when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.”*

All this tells us many things. Obviously, it tells us that there can be unexpected spiritual riches and resources in those who may appear to be the most unlikely possessors of them. The Samaritans were foreigners and heretics — and actually quite mistaken in their view of themselves. But many of them outshone many adherents of the true religion both during Christ’s public ministry and in the time of the early Church, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles. The Samaritan leper responded to Christ more highly than did his Jewish companions. Both he and they had the faith to appeal to Christ in their need and to believe his word. But he was grateful to him for his mercy. He offers us an important example of gratitude. Let us take our cue from him, and be always profoundly grateful.



Thursday of the thirty-second week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 88 (87):3 Let my prayer come into your presence. Incline your ear to my cry for help, O Lord.

Collect Almighty and merciful God, graciously keep from us all adversity, so that, unhindered in mind and body alike, we may pursue in freedom of heart the things that are yours. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Philemon 7-20; Psalm 145; Luke 17:20-25

Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you. Then he said to his disciples, The time is coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it. Men

will tell you, 'There he is!' or 'Here he is!' Do not go running off after them. For the Son of Man in his day will be like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other. But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. (Luke 17:20-25)

The Kingdom One of the most obvious things about our Lord's preaching and instruction as it is reported to us in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke is his stress on "the Kingdom." The "Kingdom" is coming, it is near, and it has come. Our Lord repeatedly describes the "Kingdom" and who will enter it. His mission is to establish "the Kingdom." In the Gospel of Matthew it is called "the Kingdom" or "the Kingdom of heaven", though at times it has other forms such as "the Kingdom of their Father" or "the Kingdom of God." In Mark it is "the Kingdom of God" and it is the same in Luke. Neither Mark nor Luke call the "Kingdom" the "Kingdom of Heaven" — perhaps because of their intended Gentile readership. In John, our Lord refers to "the Kingdom" (to Nicodemus) and "my Kingdom" (to Pilate) five times. The

Acts has eight references to it, St Paul has some fourteen (excluding Hebrews), and there are some references to it in the remaining Letters of the New Testament and in the Book of Revelation. It is plain that it was a favoured expression of Jesus Christ. The “Kingdom” was the sum of God’s blessings that constituted the Promise foretold by his Revelation. So marked was this that in our Gospel passage today the Pharisees ask our Lord “*when the Kingdom of God would come.*” Further, it was clear that in “the Kingdom of Heaven” or “the Kingdom of God,” Jesus Christ is the Messiah-King. “I am he” he said to the Samaritan Woman. What this meant, and what the “Kingdom” really meant, was the grand question and it was subject to popular misunderstanding. After feeding the multitudes on one occasion, Christ was threatened with a move to make him king — meaning, a political king. He withdrew from the scene (John 6:15). When he was brought before Pilate, the charge the religious authorities laid against him (hoping it would tell with the Roman procurator) was of political sedition. He claimed to be a

king, and Pilate asked him if that was what he was. Our Lord responded that he was a “King” only in a certain sense, and certainly his “Kingdom” was not of this world. Pilate did not know what he was talking about, but it was obvious to him that Jesus was not engaged in anything politically seditious, nor aspiring to any civil authority.

So, what was this “Kingdom of heaven,” this “Kingdom of God,” this “my Kingdom” that our Lord refers to in his preaching and teaching? In our Gospel passage today (Luke 17: 20 25), our Lord explains to the Pharisees that it is not something that comes subject to “observation” or the “keeping of a watch.” It is not something you will be able to point to as being seen, and indicated with the cry, “here it is,” or “there it is.” Our Lord is saying that it is not a kingdom of this world — though he will elsewhere establish a structure with his Apostles as the foundation. This structure, his Church, will indeed be visible, and will bear within it the unseen Kingdom. The “Kingdom” itself is primarily his very self — Christ himself and union with him by grace. In our

passage today, our Lord explains that the “*Kingdom of God is within you.*” The word “within” (*entos*) is important — it is often translated as “among.” The problem with “among” is that it can convey the idea of a visible regime, whereas our Lord has just explained that it is not this, in essence. Zerwick and Grosvenor (*An Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, 1981) observe that the word “among,” as a translation of the Greek is “elsewhere unknown” (p.251). Be that as it may, what is more telling is the long discourse of our Lord at the Last Supper, as recorded by St John in his Gospel. In that account, Simon Peter, Thomas, Philip, and Jude (not Iscariot) pose questions to our Lord. Jude’s question is “*Lord how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?*” (John 14: 22). Jude is wondering what kind of Kingdom this must be if the world is not to see it. Our Lord replies, “*if a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him*” (John 14:23). This, in essence, is the Kingdom of God. This is the reign of God which must be brought to all the nations.

It is “within” the hearts of Christ’s disciples, and it affects their whole life because it involves keeping Christ’s word. The “Kingdom of God” is above all union with Jesus Christ and the Father, in the Holy Spirit. Its consequence is the divine indwelling. This is made possible by faith, baptism and entry into Christ’s body the Church. Redemption, sanctification and perfection is the wonderful treasure that this “Kingdom of God” offers to all.

Let us make it our life’s ambition to be citizens of this Kingdom with all our mind, heart, soul and strength. It is nothing other than being a full-hearted disciple of Jesus Christ, taking all the means he has given us through his Church to live in him. Throughout his Letters, St Paul is insisting on being “in Christ.” The Christian is one who is in Christ, and his ambition ought be to live in him. Let us shake off our ingrained lethargy, our pride, our sin, and give ourselves wholly to life in Christ and to the bringing of him to the world. This is the “Kingdom” that will have no end. It is not *of* this world, but it is *present in* this

world, and it will take this world into an eternity with God,
for ever and ever.

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Second reflection:

Wisdom Our experience of life involves the experience of persons of influence, be their influence for good or not. We ourselves influence others for good or for ill. From childhood, influences bear down on us, and we see influences bearing down on others around us. Great changes come about in the world in the course of our lifetime and as history proceeds. In large measure these changes are due to personal influence. If a person possesses wisdom and lives by it, the influence he has will be for the good. Thus it is that the crux of the issue of good or evil prevailing in the world will be the degree to which true wisdom prevails and is in possession. The world will rise or fall on the victory or otherwise of true

wisdom. The Old Testament book of Wisdom speaks of the glory and the power of true wisdom, and that wisdom is the Wisdom of God. What this inspired text teaches is that the Wisdom of God can and is given to men who are disposed for it and who humbly ask for it.

The Book reminds us that it is imperative that we obtain from God this gift of wisdom if we are ever to attain our true end, the end to which God has called us. This is holiness of life and union with God, and the completion of our God given work in life. Let us then ask the Holy Spirit our Counsellor and Guide for the gift of divine wisdom, and the help to live according to it.



Friday of the thirty-second week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 88 (87):3 Let my prayer come into your presence. Incline your ear to my cry for help, O Lord.

Collect Almighty and merciful God, graciously keep from us all adversity, so that, unhindered in mind and body alike, we may pursue in freedom of heart the things that are yours. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 2 John 4-9; Psalm 118; Luke 17:26-37

Jesus said, Just as it was in the days of Noah, so also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all. It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and

sulphur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all. It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed. On that day no one who is on the roof of his house, with his goods inside, should go down to get them. Likewise, no one in the field should go back for anything. Remember Lot's wife! Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it. I tell you, on that night two people will be in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding grain together; one will be taken and the other left. Where, Lord? they asked. He replied, Where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather. (Luke 17:26-37)

The Judgment

In his book, *Conscience in Medieval Philosophy* (1980), Timothy C. Potts writes that “Conscience has been much neglected by philosophers. It is not directly treated in ancient philosophy, while, apart from Bishop Butler, who was primarily interested in the aspect of self-deception, there is scarcely a philosopher from Descartes to the present day who has touched upon it more than tangentially.” Potts goes on to explain that in the

thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, however, “conscience became a standard component of commentaries upon Peter Lombard’s Judgements and from there found its way into university seminars” (p.1). One of the well-known features of the thought of St John Henry Newman in 19th century England was the centrality of Conscience. Conscience had a fundamental place in his philosophy of man and religion. Interestingly, he made of Conscience the natural ground of religion — it is, as he wrote in an early Anglican sermon, “the principle and sanction of religion in the mind.” There have been various philosophies of religion, and the one that Newman gradually developed had an important place for the Conscience. In particular, it was “the feeling of a judgment” involved in the experience of conscience that is the starting point of religion. Newman maintained that man has a vague sense of a divine Lawgiver and Judge behind the moral obligation which he instinctively and naturally perceives. Wrongdoing is vaguely perceived as sinful, and at the heart of this there is the sense of a judgment on oneself by a Judge who has the

right to obedience. Doubtless this would be contested by the agnostic, the religiously indifferent, let alone the atheist. But it would be hard to dispute that man has, within his conscience, a natural sense of being judged — the dispute would be about who or what is the perceived “judge.” Be that as it may, this natural sense of a judgment attains its confirmation and fulfilment in receiving the Revelation that God has given of a coming Judgment. It is one of the most basic elements of historical Revelation that God is judging man and will judge him for his deliberate thoughts, words and deeds.

The point is prominent in the first pages of the Bible, and it is one of the first things that the Serpent denies when tempting the Woman. God commands the Man he has created not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil “*for on the day that you eat of it you shall die*” (Genesis 2:17). He will be judged and condemned to death. It was this that the Serpent, who “*was more cunning than any other wild creature that the Lord God had made,*” denied. He said to the Woman, “*You will not die. For God*

knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (3:4-5). The Woman ate of the tree, and gave it to her husband, “and he ate.” They hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden, for they sensed the coming judgment. God’s judgment followed. “What is this that you have done?” he asked the Woman. God then judged the Serpent, then the Woman and then the Man, and their punishment followed. All through the Scriptures the coming of God to judge is prominent, although the main emphasis throughout the Old Testament is on the results of this judgment during life. Moses promises that if the Pharaoh does not accede to God’s commands, he and all of Egypt will be punished. The divine judgment has results here and now. In the Prophet Hosea, the divine judgment will find expression in temporal misfortunes: “Samaria’s king shall perish like a chip on the face of the waters I will put Ephraim to the yoke, Judah must plough, Jacob must harrow for himself” (Hosea 10: 7-11). But it is especially in the teaching of Jesus Christ that the theme of

God's *judgment* comes into its own. God has sent his Son not to judge the world but to save it — nevertheless, the incarnate Son of God repeatedly and extensively warns of the Divine Judgment and its eternal repercussions. Every person will be judged for his actions. In his parable of the Rich Man and the poor man Lazarus, the Rich Man dies and goes to Hades where he cannot be reached by anyone. He neglected justice and mercy. Lazarus goes to the bosom of Abraham. There is not only an individual judgment at death, but a General Judgment of all at the end of time. This is vividly and famously described in Matthew 25: 31-46.

In our Gospel today our Lord refers to the judgment of God on man during the days of Noah and in the days of Lot when he destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. *“It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed”* — our Lord here seems to be referring to his coming at the end of time, when he will act as Lord and Judge. *“Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it”* (Luke 17: 26-37).

Let us ever keep before us the last and final things we must all face. Indeed the last things are, basically, one thing: the Divine Judgment. Christ is coming. His coming is ever before us. He wishes to come and take us with him to be where he is. But first he must judge. This is the grand Event. Let us so live as never to be unprepared!

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Second reflection:

Creation The book of Wisdom tells us what St Paul's letter to the Romans repeats, that the world we see helps us know the Creator whom we cannot see. Let us take this to heart in our daily spiritual life. Living in the world, we are surrounded with constant reminders of the living God. These reminders — his creatures — speak to us of him, and we can easily understand the language being spoken, provided we are properly disposed. Provided we are properly disposed! An immense amount depends on our fundamental (religious) dispositions. This is the case in so many other matters of life. We shall never learn a

language, we shall never come to know a person and be attuned to that person in love and sympathy, if we are not properly disposed. So too in our relations with God. We shall never attain a knowledge of the living God who is behind the veil of creation if we are not duly disposed. Let us then pray for the right dispositions, and for the help to guard them and to live according to them.

The beauty of God's creation can engross man's heart and lead him to forget and be disinterested in the beauty of its Maker. If this happens, it will be blameworthy. Let us strive to be attached to God with all our mind, heart and soul, using creatures to be attached to the Creator the more. All our lives we must work at being attached to God and detached from creatures — or putting it differently, being attached to creatures only in God and according to the mind of God.



Saturday of the thirty-second week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 88 (87):3 Let my prayer come into your presence. Incline your ear to my cry for help, O Lord.

Collect Almighty and merciful God, graciously keep from us all adversity, so that, unhindered in mind and body alike, we may pursue in freedom of heart the things that are yours. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 3 John 5-8; Psalm 111; Luke 18:1-8

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or

care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!' And the Lord said, Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth? (Luke 18:1-8)

Persevering prayer Despite the fact that the gods cannot be physically seen, heard or touched, and despite their having doubtlessly disappointed the prayers of man to them, peoples have persisted in praying to them. Man has consistently and well-nigh universally appealed to the unseen powers for aid and protection. He has constructed images of the deities and at times has even fallen into the foolishness of regarding these material constructs as those very deities. Though the atheist, agnostic or sceptic, insisting on the reality of tangible things alone, regards all this as superstitious nonsense, the voice of mankind has it

that there are unseen powers who may be supplicated for their assistance. Speaking generally and considering the universal fact of religion and of ritual, there is no doubt in the mind of needy man that the prayer of petition is worth the trouble. The grand exception to this universal conviction is the modern world of secularism which broadly assumes that the divine, indeed the supernatural generally, is virtually a figment of the imagination. The only hard facts are those that are tangible, visible, material. If this is truly assumed as the starting point of thought and life, genuine prayer and in particular the prayer of petition, of course, becomes profoundly problematic. We might start to pray, but an inveterate scepticism takes hold, and our prayer — especially our prayer of petition — drains away. There is no real God, we helplessly assume, who is Lord of all things and who has a real mind for every little thing in his creation. I have no access to some kind of transcendent Master of everything, to One whose finger sustains and controls all. Rather, everything marches on according to the drumbeat of their laws, and the best thing I

can do is to get on top of it all and be the master. If I do not, then I shall be pushed aside or crushed. This is a powerful assumption in the modern mind and it has replaced the religious starting point. Among other things it cripples prayer and any calling for divine aid — and this prayer is precisely what our Lord is pressing on us in our Gospel passage today (Luke 18: 1-8). Our Lord tells his disciples and each of us that we “*should always pray and not give up.*” The pivotal point in this passage is our Lord’s insistence on the petition that perseveres.

It is normal, natural and instinctive for the human being to pray — to a point. There is evidence for this everywhere in human culture. Even in the secular culture to which I have just referred, it is natural for people to appeal to the divine for help — at least a bit, and to a point. But then when nothing is seen to happen as a result, the prayer that has begun is abandoned and forgotten as hopeless. True prayer, the prayer that is pleasing to God, is prayer that perseveres. This is the test of faith in him. But it requires a real faith in a living, unseen God. If one is

imbued with the conviction of the truth of historical revelation, that Revelation vouchsafed to man as recorded in the Old and New Testaments, then one will have every reason to persevere in prayer. It will be prayer to the living God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and the prophets. It will be prayer to him who is the Father of Jesus Christ, and prayer to Jesus Christ himself, the incarnate God and Redeemer of man. If the Christian is to persevere in his prayer, including his prayer of petition, his mind and heart must be nourished by the revealed doctrine on God. He has to sustain his spiritual life with the Christian creed and dogma. He has to come to know the real and living Christ and accept his divine revelation. This is the first point. But then he must not be fundamentalist in his understanding of that revelation. By this I mean that he must not take some single sentence in the inspired Scriptures and regard that as the only thing which Christ has revealed on the matter. He must consider the sweep of the Scriptures and its full meaning, especially as understood by Christ's envoy and body, the Church. What

do the Scriptures say on the point, and what does the Church in her teaching say about it? In the matter of prayer, the Christian will read in the Gospels that our Lord assures us that our prayer will be answered — but he also sees that at times it is not answered in the precise form requested. Christ asked that the “chalice” of his sufferings be spared him — if it were his Father’s will. It was not spared him. One thing is abundantly plain, though. It is that God wants us to ask him for what, in his presence, we think we need, and he does not want us to give up on our prayer if an answer we want does not seem forthcoming.

Let us remember all our lives the critically important message of our Gospel passage today. We have so much to pray for in terms of our own personal needs, especially our spiritual needs, and those of others — indeed those of the whole world. We must not give up on our prayer for these needs! If we do, we shall be demonstrating to God our lack of faith in him, and missing out on God’s answers to our petitions. There is no doubt that we do not receive more from God precisely because we do not ask for more, or

because we give up asking for what we need. We must pray constantly, and never lose heart, our Lord tells us. Let us act on this, then!

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Second reflection: (Luke 18: 1-8)

“Jesus told his disciples a parable about the need to pray continually and never lose heart” St Alphonsus Liguori placed a great stress on the prayer of petition. He wrote that a fundamental reason why we do not make the spiritual progress we could make is that we do not ask for the graces that are necessary. He said that we do not receive much if we do not bother to ask for much, and that the more we ask for from God the more we receive. What, then, is the problem? The problem all too often is that *we tend to give up asking*. We tend to lose heart and then give up on God. We secretly think it will make little difference and that the prayer of petition is a futile exercise. All too often we just do not ask at all, and all because God is not taken to be the Reality in our hearts

that he is. A test of our faith in God is the readiness with which we ask him for what we need, and the perseverance with which we continue to ask. In today's Gospel parable our Lord teaches the importance of *persevering* in our prayers of petition. God knows the best time and the best way to answer our prayers, but if we give up asking and let our active faith drain away because of mere appearances, in effect we are, to a point, losing faith in God. It is high praise to God if we keep up our prayer, refusing to give in to the thought that he does not have the power or the love to respond. The power of God is shown precisely in his mercy. Our Lord guarantees that God will hear the persevering prayers of "*his chosen who cry to him day and night even when he delays to help them.*"

Placing our faith in the word of Christ then, and resolving to believe in the power and the love of God, let us fill up our days with persevering prayer of petition for ourselves and for all those in need.



Thirty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Jer 29:11, 12, 14 The Lord said: I think thoughts of peace and not of affliction. You will call upon me, and I will answer you, and I will lead back your captives from every place.

Collect Grant us, we pray, O Lord our God, the constant gladness of being devoted to you, for it is full and lasting happiness to serve with constancy the author of all that is good. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31; Psalm 128: 1-5; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6; Matthew 25:14-30

Jesus said to his disciples, “Again, it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his wealth to them. To one he gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his ability. Then he went on his journey. The

man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put his money to work and gained five bags more. So also, the one with two bags of gold gained two more. But the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. "After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received five bags of gold brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five bags of gold. See, I have gained five more.' "His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' "The man with two bags of gold also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two bags of gold; see, I have gained two more.' "His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' "Then the man who had received one bag of gold came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you

have not sown and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went out and hid your gold in the ground. See, here is what belongs to you.’ “His master replied, ‘You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered seed? Well then, you should have put my money on deposit with the bankers, so that when I returned I would have received it back with interest. “ ‘Take the bag of gold from him and give it to the one who has ten bags. For those who have will be given more, and they will have an abundance. As for those who do not have, even what they have will be taken from them. And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ (Matthew 25:14-30)

The Church If I want to be healthy in my whole mind and body, I should at least eat properly and get good exercise. The health of one part of the body contributes to the general good of the whole. If there is gangrene in my foot, or if my heart is weak — then my whole body will be

affected. It is the same even if I have but a cold, or a slight toothache. The mind and the soul may be affected too. Conversely, a person's mental health may affect his physical state. There is a deep interconnection between all elements that make up the human person for his whole being is one. Something of this applies to social life: a disruptive member of a family affects the health of the whole family. Individuals can affect a society, and a particular society the world. The Church is the mystical body of Christ — drawing this terminology from Scripture. It is the communion of those who are in union with Christ — those who are members of his “body.” In the Creed, which we proclaim all together each Sunday after the homily, we profess to believe in the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints. The Church is the communion of saints in heaven, on earth and in purgatory. St Paul in his Letters typically referred to the Christians to whom he was writing as “the saints,” which in that context means those who are “in Christ” by faith, baptism, and by a consistent Christian life. Such a person shares in Christ's life. The

Church is the communion of such persons and it embraces all the Church's members, united with one another due to their union with her Head, Jesus Christ. The Church! I once read a news item that described the beliefs of an Archbishop of a Protestant Church in Australia. His beliefs were, of course, Protestant, and I noted how he put very little importance on the Church. He would accept the Church in the general sense of all those who are "in Christ." But he did not place much emphasis on the "Church" as an intended divine institution with definite structures and channels that are necessary for the attainment of grace and a growing life in Christ. In this further sense, the Church (understood as a divine and visible society) was for him decidedly unnecessary. But Christ who is the Church's Head founded it to be a communion with a definite and enduring structure, with definite powers, various officers, and a definite mission. The Church is not just an accidental, even if useful, outgrowth of a movement of people who are in various relationships to the Saviour.

St Paul tells us that we are members of one body, and Christ is the head. That is the Church, Christ's creation. An important result of this is that due to the oneness of this body, the spiritual gifts, graces, merits, and endowments of each and all, drawn from their common life in Christ, can be shared. The merits of one are of benefit to others of the Body, be they here on earth or being purified in Purgatory. Those in Heaven, Purgatory, or on earth are all "in Christ," who imparts to the members of his body the riches they enjoy and which have their source in him. These riches that come from him reach us here on earth primarily through the Church's preaching and teaching of the word of God and her administration of the sacraments. By our faithful response we can, by the aid of God, increase our merits and these too become part of the spiritual capital powering the health of the whole Church. We ourselves are aided by the prayers and merits of those in Heaven. In our Gospel passage today (Matthew 25: 14-30) our Lord tells us a parable in which the master entrusts his wealth to his servants, depending on their ability. This detail

reminds us of the riches that have flowed to us from Christ our Head because of our communion with him. Further, these are a responsibility and we must put them to work. By doing this we can increase the Church's wellbeing and spiritual resources. The Church's members draw on this when they gain what the Church calls "Indulgences." Our Lord looks to us to add to the spiritual capital that is available for the good of the Church. By our daily prayer, our penance, by our dedication to our duties of state, by offering up our failures to God, we add to the Church's fund of merits, and this treasury will powerfully aid in the reclamation of sinners. It strengthens the Church's spiritual blood bank, as it were, and will be like the blood transfusion available for the aid of injured persons. It will be applied by God to wherever the Church needs it. This easy communion of spiritual goods explains why the saint is so spiritually effective. The fruits of his merits mysteriously overflow to others who need them. Power goes out from him, as it were, when the hem of his garment is touched. The more his union with and likeness to the

Master increases, the more will he become a conduit of spiritual power and life to those who need it.

In this way, no matter who we are nor how lowly in the eyes of men may be our work and position, we can contribute invisibly to the good of the whole. This is because we are part of the communion of saints that is the Church. Let us live this doctrine of the Communion of Saints, proclaimed every Sunday in the Creed, enabling it to give fruitfulness to our lives.

Further Reading: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.946-959 (The Communion of Saints)



Monday of the thirty-third week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Jer. 29:11, 12, 14 The Lord said: I think thoughts of peace and not of affliction. You will call upon me, and I will answer you, and I will lead back your captives from every place.

Collect Grant us, we pray, O Lord our God, the constant gladness of being devoted to you, for it is full and lasting happiness to serve with constancy the author of all that is good. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Apocalypse 1:1-4; 2:1-5; Psalm 1;
 Luke 18:35-43

As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard the crowd going by, he asked what was happening. They told him, Jesus of Nazareth is passing by. He called out, Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me! Those who led the way rebuked him

and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, Son of David, have mercy on me! Jesus stopped and ordered the man to be brought to him. When he came near, Jesus asked him, What do you want me to do for you? Lord, I want to see, he replied. Jesus said to him, Receive your sight; your faith has healed you. Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus, praising God. When all the people saw it, they also praised God. (Luke 18: 35-43)

Petition For believer and non-believer alike, the world presents one almost intractable problem. It is the problem of suffering and evil. It tests the faith of the believer, and it deepens his faith if the test is passed. It is also the trump-card of the non-believer, especially if he is militant about his atheism, his agnosticism or his scepticism. As one self-professed atheist and professional philosopher (Peter Singer) has said, if there were a God, he would have done a better job of things. Man suffers during life, and often terribly so — he cries out for mercy, compassion and aid. One of the distinguishing things about man as against the animal is that he can laugh. An

animal cannot laugh. But perhaps one can say that, more often, man weeps. Christ wept at the death of Lazarus his friend (John 11:35). He wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41). To say the very least, the world is a sad puzzle — it is profoundly flawed, and man especially so. His heart aches under the burden of his sufferings, and the whole world groans with him. So it is that we may look on our Gospel scene today as a snapshot of creation and in particular of man. Over the heads of the crowd there is heard a sound of great pathos: “*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*” (Luke 18: 35-43). This cry of man is heard over the multitudes age after age from the beginning till now, and it ever will be heard till the end. From his helplessness man cries out to his gods, and when the true and living God makes himself known to those chosen by him — as the Helper of man in distress — man continues to cry out to him for help. Our blind man sitting by the roadside of Jericho is a worthy representative of this fallen, broken man. He hears that Jesus is passing by. He calls out for mercy and due to his prayer to Jesus he gains it. Now, let

us notice and reflect on one thing. As our Lord said, his prayer of faith saved him. What would have happened had he not appealed to Jesus for mercy? It is to be presumed that Christ would have passed him by. The man would have remained in his blindness, it is to be supposed, for the rest of his life. As Jesus said to him, “*Your faith has saved you.*” That is to say, it was the blind man’s initiative in praying for help, born of his faith, that occasioned Christ’s act of mercy.

This point is worth pondering. While it was Jesus who did the healing, and God as Creator who was the ultimate Author of the blind man’s initiative in asking for mercy, in a real sense it depended on the blind man’s resolve to appeal. There may have been other blind men in Jericho and its vicinity — but there is no report of their cure. In fact, generally our Lord responded to needs that were presented to him. He calmed the raging storm because his terrified disciples woke him to their plight. While there were many cases of his miraculous action without a formal request, generally in such cases the

human need was before him. It was placed there by somebody, or placed there by the course of events. There seems to be a pattern in our Lord's deliverance of persons from their distress. The distress was brought to his attention by a formal petition, or it was brought to his attention by some other means. He was not formally asked to raise to life the dead young man of the village of Nain. But by a concurrence of events, the dead young man was brought before him, together with his grieving widowed mother. Our Lord did not indiscriminately relieve persons of sorrows that were never brought before him by any means. Speaking broadly and allowing for plenty of notable exceptions, the general pattern seems to be that God intervenes as the Deliverer of man as a result of suffering being brought before him, whether by explicit, formal petition or by some other means. All this is to say that God wants us to pray for our needs and for the needs of our fellow man. Generally speaking, the bringing of needs before God seems to be *part* of the Divine plan of God's answer to the problem of evil. When the paralytic

was lowered from the roof and placed before him, Jesus saw their faith — both the faith of the paralytic and the faith of his friends — and proceeded to forgive his sins and cure him of his paralysis. The paralytic would not have received this double blessing had his need not been brought before the Redeemer. The very redemption of man from his sins was the result of the great sacrificial and priestly prayer on Calvary of man's Champion, Jesus Christ whom the Father had sent. Christ the Victim and Priest was our Petitioner, and his prayer was heard.

What is the answer to the problem of evil and suffering, which — though the atheist does not understand it — at root springs from man's sin, both original and personal? A most important *part* of the answer is to bring the needs of the world before the Father of all mercies. There has to be an unremitting ocean of prayer for mercy arising from the hearts of mankind to the Father of all blessings. That is clearly according to the Divine plan. This prayer should be united with that of Christ our great High Priest, who continually intercedes for us at the right

hand of the Father. This prayer of our Intercessor is one with his all-effective sacrifice on Calvary, that one sacrifice which is made present at Mass on our altars. By this all-powerful intercession of the Head in union with his body the Church, the world is sustained and can flourish. Let intercession for the world abound in us, then!

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Second reflection: The “world” In her spiritual teaching the Church alerts her faithful against one great barrier to the attainment of a great love of God. It is what Scripture calls “the world.” The world, the flesh and the devil conspire to lead us astray into infidelity and sin, and the wages of sin is death. The “world” consists of those influences stemming from society that oppose the plan of God for our salvation and sanctification. We have in the First Book of Maccabees (ch.1) a vivid instance of the influence of the world on the children of Israel in the time of the Maccabees. In this case, “the world” was represented by the will of the ruler Antiochus Epiphanes.

It was also active in those of the people of Israel who wished “*to practise pagan observances*” and who submitted “*to the heathen rule as willing slaves of impiety.*” We are told in the text that “*all the pagans conformed to the king’s decree, and many Israelites chose to accept his religion, sacrificing to idols and profaning the Sabbath.*” That was one instance of “*the world.*” The pattern has recurred time and again within the life of the Church and among the faithful. We must be alert to the insidious influence of “*the world*”, so opposed to that of Christ. Christ referred to the devil as the “*prince of this world.*” Satan makes use of “*the world.*”

Let us be on guard lest we come to think as the world thinks, rather than thinking according to the mind of Christ. St Paul writes, let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. Let us then pray for the grace to make this the foundation of our life, and the source of our resistance to all influence from the “world,” the “flesh” and the devil.



Tuesday of the thirty-third week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Jer. 29:11, 12, 14 The Lord said: I think thoughts of peace and not of affliction. You will call upon me, and I will answer you, and I will lead back your captives from every place.

Collect Grant us, we pray, O Lord our God, the constant gladness of being devoted to you, for it is full and lasting happiness to serve with constancy the author of all that is good. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Apocalypse 3:1-6.14-22; Psalm 13;
 Luke 19:1-10

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore fig tree

to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today. So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner'. But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount. Jesus said to him, Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost. (Luke 19: 1-10)

Seeing Jesus There is nothing quite like *seeing* something or someone important. A person's spouse is in hospital recuperating. It is not enough for him to contact her by phone each day. He must go and *see* her. A large family is scattered throughout the state. Come Christmas, it is not enough to send one another a fulsome Christmas card and greeting, nor to contact one another by phone or

Skype. They must come together and *see* one another. This seeing of one another is not a mere viewing. It is the kind of seeing that includes personal interaction and communion. A devout Muslim yearns to see the land of Mahomet and, in particular, Mecca. He wants to *see* it. A devout Christian experiences joy in visiting the Holy Land, the land of Abraham, the patriarchs, the prophets, and above all of Jesus Christ. He *sees* where Jesus Christ was born, grew up, engaged in his public ministry, and above all where he suffered, died, rose and ascended into Heaven for the salvation of the world. As a result of seeing this, the Gospel narrative means a lot more to him. Again, the “seeing” of where such sacred events occurred is not a mere observation. It is a form of *communion* with the One who once filled the scene with his presence. The Gospel of St John opens with the grand Prologue setting the Incarnation in the context of Eternity. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. Importantly, in him was life, and that life is the light of all people* — and of course, light enables man to

see. John tells us that this *light shines in the darkness, and the darkness could not overcome it* (John 1: 4-5). He, the Word, is the true light that enlightens everyone, and he came into the world (1:9). So the Word of God is the One who enables the world to see. With great exultation, John writes that the *Word became flesh and lived among us “and we have seen his glory”* (1:14). The greatest possible thing that man can “see” is the Word made flesh, and something of his glory, for he is “*full of grace and truth*” (1:14). But this “seeing” is not just a viewing, but a total acceptance. He, God’s only Son, is the only one who has seen God, and he has made him known (1:18).

In the Gospel of St John, the first ones who “see” Jesus and his glory are John the Baptist and his two disciples. We read that “*the next day he (the Baptist) saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, ‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’*” (John 1:29). John “saw” his glory and fully accepted it. He tells his hearers that “*I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove and it remained on him*” (1:32). The next day he

directed his two disciples to see Jesus: “*Look, there is the Lamb of God!*” (1:36). He was not inviting them merely to observe Jesus, to view him, but to enter into *communion* with him. This is exactly what the two did as a result of seeing Jesus: “*The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.*” More seeing was to come. When Jesus turned and saw them following him he asked what they were “looking for” — that is, what or who they were wanting to “see.” They replied, “*Teacher*” (immediately professing themselves to be his disciples), “*where are you staying?*” It was he whom they wanted to “see” much more of, in the sense of being in his company and accepting and receiving of his life and teaching. So our Lord said, “*Come and see*” (1: 39). What a wonderful invitation, to come and to “see” the glory of the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth. This they did, and came away and drew others to see Jesus. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “*Come and see*” — which Nathanael did, and professed a magnificent faith in Jesus as a result: “*Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King (i.e., Messiah) of Israel*” (1: 49). Just

before our Lord's Passion and Death, some Greeks approached Philip and told him, "*Sir, we wish to see Jesus*" (John 12:21). Let us bear all this in mind as we think of the chief tax collector of Jericho in our Gospel today (Luke 19: 1-10), who wished to "see" Jesus. He ran ahead of the crowd to climb the sycamore tree so as to be able more easily to see him. The event showed that he did not intend a mere viewing, a mere observation of a spectacle. As our Lord said of him, he was "*a son of Abraham*" despite his sinful life. He wanted to see Jesus because in his heart there was a yearning for communion with God, and this Jesus was manifestly the Presence of God among men.

There is a deeper "seeing" of Jesus, a more important sight of him than mere physical sight. Very many saw him at the time. Many even of his own disciples, having seen and heard him, walked away from him (John 6:66). During Christ's Passion, Herod had long wanted to see him in order to see some miracle. Christ would not speak to him. The more important "sight" of Christ is the "sight" of genuine faith, the "sight" of the believing heart, the heart

that wishes and intends to hear the word of Christ and to put it into practice. This is the best “sight” of all, the “sight” of one who may not see physically but who believes. When the doubting Thomas did see the risen Jesus he rose to the occasion with his magnificent profession: “*My Lord and my God!*” But then, as our Lord said to him: “*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe*” (John 20:28-29). Let us pray for a deeper “sight,” the sight of a profound faith.

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Second reflection:

Fidelity In the Second Book of Maccabees we read of the faithful figure of Eleazar “*one of the foremost teachers of the Law*”, being pressured under threat of death to violate the stipulations of God’s Law. Despite all pressure and despite his advanced years with its concomitant weakness, he refused. What was the secret of his fidelity? His conduct had been impeccable from his boyhood. He had taken a firm and holy decision to be uncompromising on this because it involved “*the holy legislation established by God himself*” (2 Maccabees 6). He was aware, too, of the effect on others — especially the young — were he to submit to this pressure. These and various other reasons combined to give him an invincible fidelity to the will of God at a critical hour. Eleazar is a wonderful example for all who have reached advanced years and for those whose advanced years are still ahead of them. The best way to prepare for the difficulties in being faithful to God in old age is to be very faithful to him in the years of one’s youth and strength. The best way to prepare

for a holy death is to live the present moment in a holy way. For this we need the grace of God both now and at the last.

Let us pray to Our Lady, using the words of the Hail Mary, that she, the Mother of God pray for us sinners both now and at the hour of our death. Let us not underestimate the importance of the present in preparing for the future. Let us give to God the whole of the present, and in that way prepare to give him everything at the end.



Wednesday of the thirty-third week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Jer. 29:11, 12, 14 The Lord said: I think thoughts of peace and not of affliction. You will call upon me, and I will answer you, and I will lead back your captives from every place.

Collect Grant us, we pray, O Lord our God, the constant gladness of being devoted to you, for it is full and lasting happiness to serve with constancy the author of all that is good. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Apocalypse 4:1-11; Psalm 150;
 Luke 19:11-28

While they were listening to this, he went on to tell them a parable, because he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once. He said: A man of noble birth went to a distant country to receive for himself a kingdom and then

to return. So he called ten of his servants and gave them ten minas. 'Put this money to work,' he said, 'until I come back.' But his subjects hated him and sent a delegation after him to say, 'We don't want this man to be our king.' He was made king, however, and returned home. Then he sent for the servants to whom he had given the money, in order to find out what they had gained with it. The first one came and said, 'Sir, your mina has earned ten more.' 'Well done, my good servant!' his master replied. 'Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities.' The second came and said, 'Sir, your mina has earned five more.' His master answered, 'You take charge of five cities.' Then another servant came and said, 'Sir, here is your mina; I have kept it laid away in a piece of cloth. I was afraid of you, because you are a hard man. You take out what you did not put in and reap what you did not sow.' His master replied, 'I will judge you by your own words, you wicked servant! You knew, did you, that I am a hard man, taking out what I did not put in, and reaping what I did not sow? Why then didn't you put

my money on deposit, so that when I came back, I could have collected it with interest?’ Then he said to those standing by, ‘Take his mina away from him and give it to the one who has ten minas.’ ‘Sir,’ they said, ‘he already has ten!’ He replied, ‘I tell you that to everyone who has, more will be given, but as for the one who has nothing, even what he has will be taken away. But those enemies of mine who did not want me to be a king over them- bring them here and kill them in front of me.’ After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. (Luke 19:11-28)

The Kingdom Our Gospel passage today tells us that “*while they were listening to this, he went on to tell them a parable, because he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once.*” In Luke’s narrative, our Lord’s journey to Jerusalem is highlighted and many of his doings and sayings strung together in tandem with this journey. There is especially his frequent reference to “the Kingdom of God” and to life in this “Kingdom.” The climax of the

journey up to the City would be his Passion, Death and Resurrection. While the crowds had no idea of the coming upshot of the journey in process, our Lord warned his disciples of it (such as in Luke 18:31-33), but they did not understand (18:34). However, there must have been a growing anticipation among the crowds that “*the kingdom of God was going to appear,*” and “*at once.*” Expectation was in the air. God’s Kingdom was coming, coming soon and even now. It was clear that Jesus was the King. Within a short time, Jesus would be standing before the Roman Procurator and being asked if it was true that he was a “king.” The chief priests would be accusing him before Pilate of stirring up sedition, and claiming to be a “king” in opposition to Caesar — all of which Christ would sovereignly deny and which Pilate himself would understand to be baseless. But this is the context of what we read, that the people listening to Jesus, watching him and accompanying him “*thought that the Kingdom of God was going to appear at once,*” especially perhaps as the Holy City was being approached. They were not wrong.

The Kingdom of God was very near indeed, and the Holy City would be the scene of its inauguration and establishment here on earth. That Kingdom would be present in the Person of Jesus Christ, sacrificed as the Lamb of God and given to the Father on mankind's behalf, risen from the dead, triumphant in his glory, ascended and seated at the right hand of the Father, and with the Father bestowing the Divine Spirit on his body the Church. The scene of this cosmic and pivotal run of events in which the Kingdom "*was going to appear at once,*" would be the holy city of Jerusalem and its immediate vicinity. The eyes of heaven were all on this City.

But of course, neither the crowds nor even our Lord's disciples (except the greatest of them, his own blessed Mother) yet understood the "Kingdom" nor the "baptism" that it would entail. It was something far grander than anything they imagined. It involved a new creation. It had to do with taking away the sin of the world and the bestowal of the holiness of God. For all of this to happen, the Messiah had a chalice from which to drink. Those who

wanted places in his Kingdom, and even places at his right and his left, had yet to understand what it was they were asking for. Our Lord was at pains to explain it, and when the Spirit was given, they would remember and understand. In today's parable our Lord explains a very important facet of life in the Kingdom. The "*nobleman*" — the "*well-born*" man — "*went to a distant country to receive for himself a kingdom and then to return.*" Our Lord was returning to his Father "*to receive for himself*" the Kingdom. But he would eventually return and when he did there would be a rendering of accounts. So then, in our parable the King would be absent from sight for a period of time while he went afar to receive his kingdom. Presumably the real-life context of such an imagined scenario was the likes of lesser kings (such as Herod the Great, and later his sons) going to Rome to receive their authority. In the parable, there are two groups that the king leaves behind when he goes to the distant country: there are his subjects and there are his servants. To ensure that his interests flourished among his prospective subjects during

this absence, he placed in the hands of his servants important responsibilities. He could not leave his realm without due supervision, for then its prosperity would drain away and be usurped by others. *“So he called ten of his servants and gave them ten minas. ‘Put this money to work,’ he said, ‘until I come back.’”* So there are officers in the Kingdom – those who have special duties of service to the King. But then when the King departs, the “subjects” have their say and it is a negative one. They *“hated him and sent a delegation after him to say, ‘We don’t want this man to be our king.’”* Despite this, he received the kingdom and returned, and then both subjects and servants were subject to his judgment.

Several things are insisted on in our parable today. The “Kingdom” is, of course, union with Christ the King, and a sharing of his life. He is absent from visible, physical sight, but he requires a loving obedience from both his subjects and his servants. The subjects must accept his lordship over them. Most especially, the servants must diligently strive to promote his interests in

accord with the responsibilities given to them. Our Lord is painting a broad picture of his body the Church, the bearer of his divine Person and therefore of the Kingdom. Whatever be our calling as members of the Church, let us so fulfil our duties to Christ as to receive his abundant reward and not suffer the terrible lot of a final loss of his favour.

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Second reflection: (Luke 19:11-28)

“Everyone who has will be given more” There is no getting around it. We are placed on this earth to *work* and so to contribute to the betterment of the world. On one occasion when Our Lord was criticised for working on the Sabbath he answered by saying that since his own Father was *working* — he was implying that his heavenly Father was working unceasingly — then he too would *work*. Of course, our Lord insisted on the Sabbath rest, but rejected the Pharisaical interpretation of this. But God continues to *work*, though he has created the world. His work of creation and sanctification never ceases. At the beginning of the Bible God gives to man the mission of filling the earth and mastering it — managing it so that it serves man’s truest and best interests. In our Gospel passage today (Luke 19: 11-28), Our Lord tells the parable of the appointed king who returned to see how much profit his servants had made for him. He intended that they increase his wealth. The servant who did nothing with the money was condemned and what he had was taken from him.

Whatever we have been given by God, then, he means us to put it to work for his glory and his interests. This is the meaning of life and the key to enduring happiness. It squares perfectly too with what we could call Nature. We naturally know that we must work, and the success of a person's life depends on the degree to which he works and works well. So much of a child's upbringing centres around preparing him for his life's work. Well, it is this that we are called to supernaturalise, we could say. We are to sanctify our work, and in this way be sanctified, and in turn sanctify others. A person's life hinges around his *work* and this fact applies equally to the Christian who unites himself to Christ in and through his *work*. Let us make our work both a work for God and a work of God.



Thursday of the thirty-third week of Ordinary Time

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Scripture today: Apocalypse 5:1-10; Psalm 149;
 Luke 19:41-44

As Jesus approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace- but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and

encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognise the time of God's coming to you. (Luke 19: 41-44)

The choice David Hume (1711-1776) is commonly counted as one of the greatest and most acute philosophers in the British tradition and has occasioned a constant industry of commentary. His great errors have had the beneficial effect on theists and defenders of objective morality of forcing them to clarify their intellectual foundations. One notable position of Hume is that morality is ultimately a mere feeling, involving no apprehension of anything truly objective. Starting with his dictum that everything we can know is observable by the senses and reasoned about on that basis, he considered “morally wrong” actions and situations. No matter what we find about the situation (with our senses and reason), he declared, we shall never find the actual existence or quality of vice. The “ought” of things cannot be derived from the

“is”— that is, from the facts about it. This, the “ought,” is only to be found in “your own breast” — it is simply a “sentiment of disapprobation.” So that is what so-called objective morality is. It is a personal feeling that you have. Hume’s “guillotine” chopped off morality and consigned it to the bin as being without objective substance. So it is that, in the world of thought and philosophy, we have a widespread doubt, scepticism and rejection of the objectivity of the moral law. Concrete empirical facts are objective, but not “morality” because, well, where is it? Point to it, please! Let me see and touch it! What is all this business about the natural law? I can’t see, feel or hear it, so it must simply be your preference or the preference of many societies. Such is the claim. But this has to be regarded as nonsense, and as flouting ordinary common sense. It is not necessary for the ordinary man and society to be able to specify what faculty of knowledge (over and above the senses) it is that perceives objective moral obligation. But there is no doubt in the mind of mankind that the moral law is just as objective as any physical law.

It is just as clear that the moral law requiring that you not kill the innocent, is as real and as powerful as the physical law of gravity. If you do kill the innocent, you are justly subject to tremendous sanctions, and man has usually had the conviction that if society does not catch up with you, the gods will. But of course, poor old Hume had no place for the divine, because you cannot see or touch it.

Actually, even on Hume's criteria for human knowing, you could see and touch the divine — that is, you could do this when Jesus Christ walked the earth. He, a physical man, was God incarnate. The important point being stressed here, though, is that the moral law is objective and it pervades all of reality, seen and unseen. It is the very law of God, the law of his being, for God is a moral God. All that he creatively touches is instantly imbued with the moral law. Man perceives with his reason that, in respect to himself and in respect to all other things, he is obliged to act in ways that are not just effective, useful and strategic, but morally right and good. It is only thus will he flourish, and if he does not so act, then he will

decline and die in ways more profound than mere physical death. It is by choosing to think, speak and act in ways that are morally good that he becomes good himself and better as a man. If he chooses to do bad things, if he chooses to reject the moral law, if he chooses to disobey God, and if he knows that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God and chooses to turn away from him in unbelief, then this moral choice will have tremendous repercussions. Moral laws are no less real than physical laws, and the results of the former are as real than those of the latter. If you do not take adequate care, and then step on to the road without looking, the physical result will be your death from an oncoming car. The moral law is no less powerful if it is disregarded and flouted. Let us think of all this as we place ourselves in the Gospel scene of today as our Lord gazes on the City of his love. It has not wished to receive him. This is a moral choice, a moral response to the Blessing that has been offered to it by the Lord of all. How sad the fact! *“As Jesus approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it and said, If you, even you, had only known on*

this day what would bring you peace — but now it is hidden from your eyes.” Christ then foretells the consequences of this moral choice: “The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. ... They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognise the time of God’s coming to you” (Luke 19: 41-44).

Let us never slip into the prevalent assumption that moral obligation is little more than a private feeling, a personal bent, a feature of one’s upbringing or temperament, with no objective foundation or sanctions. As you choose, so will you be as a person, and it will all catch up with you. The Christian is very specific about this: the moral law is God’s law, and God gazes on all that he sustains in being. More specifically still, the moral task of our life is to meet, accept, believe, love and follow Jesus Christ. If you wish to be perfect, go, divest yourself of all that holds you to other things, and come back and follow him, the Lord of all, Jesus Christ our God and Saviour.

That is the supreme moral call of man, and everything hangs on his choice.

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Second reflection: (Luke 19:41-44)

“If you in your turn had only understood on this day the message of peace!” It is absolutely essential that we prepare for the future. We know that we shall die, and we know from what God has revealed that following death there will be a divine judgment, to be followed by either heaven or hell. But of course, we should not only prepare for the future after death but we should prepare for the future prior to death too. We prepare for our future exams, our retirement, and so forth. It is the will of God that we prepare adequately for the future. But the danger is that if we are constantly preparing for the future, we can give insufficient regard to the present. If we are not giving ourselves over to the duties of the present then what God means to bestow on us precisely in the present will be missed. The present contains its own blessings which, of

course, themselves prepare us for the future. In our Gospel passage today our Lord laments that Jerusalem did not recognise him for who he was. This was the day of blessings and of true peace, the day of his arrival, and yet they were blind to it. *“If you in your turn had only understood on this day the message of peace! But, alas, it is hidden from your eyes!”* (Luke 19: 41-44). In their case the present was full of blessings, for the present brought them their Redeemer, and yet it was hidden from their eyes.

Let us give ourselves over to doing God’s will as perfectly as possible in the present, opening our minds and hearts to the grace of the Holy Spirit in the here and now. In this way, day by day we shall be preparing for the future in all its stages, right to the moment of death which is the door to an eternal future. But it all depends on how we live in the present. So then, now I begin!



Friday of the thirty-third week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Jer. 29:11, 12, 14 The Lord said: I think thoughts of peace and not of affliction. You will call upon me, and I will answer you, and I will lead back your captives from every place.

Collect Grant us, we pray, O Lord our God, the constant gladness of being devoted to you, for it is full and lasting happiness to serve with constancy the author of all that is good. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Apocalypse 10:8-11; Psalm 118;
 Luke 19:45-48

Then Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were selling. It is written, he said to them, ‘My house will be a house of prayer’; but you have made it ‘a den of robbers’. Every day he was teaching at the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and

the leaders among the people were trying to kill him. Yet they could not find any way to do it, because all the people hung on his words. (Luke 19:45-48)

The Father! There are several features of our Gospel incident today which we could contemplate, but let us begin by comparing Luke's account of it with that of the other three Gospels. In Luke's account, the event takes place at the end of our Lord's public ministry, during his final visit to Jerusalem and at the threshold of his Passion. It is the same in Matthew (21: 12-13). The accounts are nearly the same, with Matthew adding a little. Christ's words are virtually identical. Mark has a fuller description of the incident (11: 15-17), but again Christ's words are practically the same: "*Is it not written, he said to them, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers.*" Mark also places the event at the end of the public ministry following his entry into the City amid acclaim, and with his Passion before him. Now, what is the meaning of this event? Obviously, it shows forth the profound love of Jesus

Christ for the Temple of Jerusalem, and in particular for his heavenly Father whose special abode here on earth this Temple was. But we are not really told much by the three Synoptic Gospels. The facts are there, and Christ's words to the offenders whom he evicted are given. They were despoiling the atmosphere of prayer that should fill the precincts of the Temple. But what more are we told of Christ's love for, and especially his revelation of, his heavenly Father? For this, we have to turn to the account given to us by St John. It is a moot point whether John is describing the same event as that which the other three Gospels present. In John's account, Christ drives out the *"those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers at their business"* very early in his public ministry (John 3:13-21), and not at the end. It may be the same event because John, even though he gives an abundance of factual detail in his descriptions of events, may not be very concerned for strict chronological order in his overall account. The various incidents that make up his Gospel are almost units in their own right. However,

John's cleansing of the Temple may have been an early episode, repeated at the end. I myself suspect it is the same as that in the Synoptics. In any case, the point here is that John tells us more of what our Lord said of his heavenly Father.

In John's account of this event — whether at the beginning or at the end of Christ's ministry — there is a special stress on the fact that the Temple, being profaned by the religious commerce, was the House of *Christ's own Father*. Further, this Temple would be succeeded by the Temple that was his body (John 2: 13-21). Very notably, Christ's zeal "consumed" him because his heavenly Father, his own Father, was being dishonoured by this constant distraction. The God who abode in the Temple was his own Father. Indeed, this is an altogether special feature of the teaching and ministry of Jesus Christ — the way he referred to God. God was "my Father" — his own Father. There is this to be noticed in John's account. In the Synoptic Gospels, the Father speaks at Christ's Baptism and designates him as his own Son. But John, in his

reference to the Baptism of Christ (1:32), does not give us these words that came from the Father. Rather, it is at the cleansing of the Temple that Christ himself speaks and refers to God as his Father: you shall not make my Father's house a house of trade (2: 16). This was, arguably, almost as momentous a statement as the words from heaven at the Baptism, given in the Synoptics. The Temple of Jerusalem! It was the holiest site in the world for the Jews, and here was One who referred to it as *the house of his own Father!* It appears in John as Christ's first reference to the God of Israel, Yahweh, precisely as his own Father. This is not present in the Synoptic account of the cleansing, as in today's Gospel from Luke. But of course, there is no doubt that it was because the Temple was the house of his heavenly Father that Christ so intrepidly cleansed it. So we may refer to John's account in understanding the event. Let us appreciate the uniqueness of Christ's reference to God in this way. Various names are used of God in the Old Testament — very often, he is Elohim, stressing his sovereignty. He is El (God) with various compounds, such

as Shaddai, Elyon, and Olam. Most commonly, he is Yahweh the God of the Covenant, with its various compounds. “Yahweh” denotes God as the One who is, and who is present with and for his chosen people. The sacred name’s numerous compounds add qualities of God’s character such as he “who provides,” or “my banner,” or “peace,” or “the Lord of hosts,” or “your Sanctifier.”

Now, there are some references to *Yahweh* (“Lord”) as *father* of his people (Exodus 4: 22-23, Isaiah 63: 16 and Malachi 1:6). He is “father” of David his “son” (2 Samuel 8:14), and of “his anointed” (Psalm 2: 2 and 7). But the title “father” is used of God only some fifteen times in the Old Testament. By contrast, it is notoriously frequent on the lips of Jesus Christ — and as “my” Father. No other prophet referred to God in this intimate, familiar way, a way that exuded immense love, reverence and yet full equality. He is God’s own Son. So extraordinary was this, that it was a principal cause of his being put to death. This he accepted, bearing witness to the truth of his divine

Personhood and Sonship in atonement for the sins of the world.

It is this to which he was bearing witness in cleansing the Temple, “my Father’s house.” Let us be filled with wonder at Jesus Christ, cleansing his *own Father’s house*. He surpasses all possible comparison.

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Second reflection: (Luke 19:45-48)

“Jesus went into the Temple and began driving out those who were selling.” Some have said that one of the most notable phenomena in so many Catholic churches is the amount of small talk and chatter going on within them, despite the abiding Real Presence of Christ in the Tabernacle. It may indicate a neglect and forgetfulness of the Real Presence. We could at least say that were there a reverent and hushed silence every time we enter a Catholic church, it would show a general awareness that Christ our God is there. Our Gospel passage today has something to

tell us about this. In our Gospel scene, Our Lord himself puts an end to the distracting activity going on in the Temple, reminding the offenders that the Temple is God's dwelling place, his house, a house of prayer. In our Gospel scene (Luke 19: 45-48), our Lord is presented as teaching in the Temple every day, and the people hung on his words. Christ now abides in our churches, and he is active in offering grace and teaching.

Our Lord continues his presence constantly in our churches, but now he is present with greater power because it is the risen Jesus who is there, active in his sacraments and in his word. Let us cultivate a profound devotion to our churches as the house of God, the place where God himself dwells in the Person of the Eucharistic Jesus. Let us strive to be like Our Lord himself in our zeal for the church's sacred character and atmosphere, for there Jesus lives and gives himself to us in word and sacrament.



Saturday of the thirty-third week of Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Jer. 29:11, 12, 14 The Lord said: I think thoughts of peace and not of affliction. You will call upon me, and I will answer you, and I will lead back your captives from every place.

Collect Grant us, we pray, O Lord our God, the constant gladness of being devoted to you, for it is full and lasting happiness to serve with constancy the author of all that is good. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Apocalypse 11:4-12; Psalm 143;

Luke 20:27-40

Some of the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus with a question. Teacher, they said, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and have children for his brother. Now there were

seven brothers. The first one married a woman and died childless. The second and then the third married her, and in the same way the seven died, leaving no children. Finally, the woman died too. Now then, at the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her? Jesus replied, The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God's children, since they are children of the resurrection. But in the account of the bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord 'the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'. He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive. Some of the teachers of the law responded, Well said, teacher! And no one dared to ask him any more questions. (Luke 20:27-40)

Our resurrection Any religion I have studied, primal or otherwise, has a belief in something after death

— except for what we might call the so-called “religion” of fundamentalist atheists and agnostics who believe in nothing except this not very sunny life (and theirs is nothing more than a “faith”). There is scholarly consensus that the early children of Israel believed in some sort of ethereal existence after death in a place called Sheol. But it seems that generally death was perceived as the end of all that was good. The curse of Genesis 3: 19 was very great: *“you shall return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust and to dust you shall return.”* Sheol was a place of twilight (we might say) to which the dead go. Jacob, distraught at the reported death of Joseph and refusing to be comforted, exclaims: *“I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning”* (Genesis 37:35). In Job 7:9, we read: *“As the cloud fades and vanishes, so he who goes down to Sheol does not come up; he returns no more to his house, nor does his place know him anymore.”* The Afterlife is imagined as a dim abode. In Psalm 6:4-5 we read, *“Turn, O Lord, save my life;.. For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who can give you*

praise?” In Sirach 17: 27-28, there is the sad lament: “*Who will sing praises to the Most High in Hades, as do those who are alive and give thanks? From the dead, as from one who does not exist, thanksgiving has ceased; he who is alive and well sings the Lord’s praises.*” There appeared to many, on the face of it, to be no reference to the Afterlife in the Pentateuch — and it seems that the Pentateuch was the only true Canon of Scripture for the Sadducees of our Gospel today. At the same time the picture elsewhere is mixed. While Genesis 3: 19 dooms sinful man to the dust, we read in Genesis 5: 24 that “*Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him.*” Famously, in 2 Kings 2:11 there is Elijah’s ascension: “*it came about as they were going along and talking, that behold, there appeared a chariot of fire and horses of fire which separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind to heaven.*”

There are, occasionally, sparks of great light in the Old Testament, but the authority of the Books in which they occur was contested at the time of Christ and earlier (although Christ himself used Daniel as an inspired book

— as in Matthew 24:15). We read in Daniel 12.2-3, “*And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever.*” In the Deutero-canonical second book of Maccabees 12: 38-46, we read that “*under the tunic of each of the dead they found amulets sacred to the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbids the Jews to wear.*” So “*the noble Judas*” ordered an expiatory sacrifice to be offered for these dead. It is then observed that: “*In doing this he acted in a very excellent and noble way, inasmuch as he had the resurrection of the dead in view; for if he were not expecting the fallen to rise again, it would have been useless and foolish to pray for them in death. But if he did this with a view to the splendid reward that awaits those who had gone to rest in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Thus he made atonement for the dead that they might be freed from this sin.*” However, all up it was by no means clear to many what

exactly God had revealed on the Afterlife. The Sadducees, our contenders with Christ today, were aristocrats. They tended to be wealthy and held prominent positions in the religious society of the day. They held strictly to those Books that were without dispute the written word of God — meaning, as they took it, only the Pentateuch. So, as we see from our Gospel today — there was no resurrection for them. The books of Moses do not mention it, and reason shows the doctrine to be ridiculous. Our Lord routed their argument in but a moment, and showed to their surprise that the very first theophany to Moses, their grand author, implied that there is an Afterlife for the good, a resurrection. God declared himself to Moses to be *the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob* — so these departed persons were *alive to God*. They were not just a memory, dead bones and ash. This encounter with Jesus showed how the Scriptures needed an Interpreter. Jesus was both Interpreter and the Interpretation, and he revealed to man his future glory.

There have been religions and religious founders that insisted on a judgment after death, and an appropriate reward and punishment flowing from this Judgment. The religion of ancient Egypt, for instance, and that of Mesopotamia, had surprising doctrines on this. But nothing and no-one has brought before man the splendid and dazzling prospects God intends for us his children which were revealed by Jesus Christ and brought to mankind by his Church. God intends us for glory, which no eye has seen nor ear heard the like. It is for “*those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead*” (Luke 20: 27-40). It is worth the effort, then, of loving and serving Christ our Lord. It will be tragic if we do not.

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Second reflection:

The Conscience St John Henry Newman writes in one of his books (*A Grammar of Assent*) that one of the ways whereby man can come to know God naturally (as distinct from Revelation) is through the course of the world's events. He is referring especially to the providence of God and what is revealed in the way God governs the world. Of course, there is not a lot in respect to God that we can discern with certainty from the course of events, but our conscience too does suggest various things. We read of the testimony of *the conscience of King Antiochus* (1 Maccabees 6), who lies on his bed full of melancholy and despair at the way things had turned out in his kingdom. Everything was going wrong, and his guilty conscience suggested what was the reason for it. "*I have been asking myself*" he says, "*how I could come to such a pitch of distress.*" The answer came to him: "*I remember the wrong I did in Jerusalem when I seized all the vessels of silver and gold there.*" Our conscience is a precious means of being in union with God, including for the pagan.

Apart from guiding us in what we should be doing, it helps us discern what is happening in our lives. It suggests or confirms that God is a holy God who rewards the good and punishes the wrongdoer. It suggests at times (and it can only *suggest* it) that he may be rewarding and punishing now with a view to our repentance while there is time. Let us treasure this monitor within us and resolve to be faithful to its promptings. We have received the gift of the Holy Spirit who teaches us through the word of God and the Church's teachings. For his voice to be heard our conscience must be sensitive. It will be more and more sensitive if we are faithful to it. Our conscience, enlightened by the Holy Spirit who reminds us of the Church's teaching and testimony, will guide us to the holiness to which God is calling us. Newman called the Conscience the "aboriginal vicar of Christ" (*Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*) — the representative of Christ which Nature provides. Let us strive to ensure it is well formed and guided, and then let us be faithful to its promptings.



Solemnity of Jesus Christ the Universal King

(Thirty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time)

Entrance Antiphon Rev 5:12; 1:6 How worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and divinity, and wisdom and strength and honour. To him belong glory and power for ever and ever.

Collect Almighty ever living God, whose will is to restore all things in your beloved Son, the King of the universe, grant, we pray, that the whole creation, set free from slavery, may render your majesty service and ceaselessly proclaim your praise. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17; Ps. 23:1-3, 5-6;
1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 28; Matthew 25:31-46

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will

separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you

gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’ They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ He will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life. (Matthew 25:31-46)

The King The images and notions of the divine, that have been in possession among men and societies, have been almost boundless. It is an intriguing thought that — as we know from historical Revelation — while the one God created all things, yet how varied are the notions held by man about the divine. How little agreement there has been about the great being that is God, and how far from the truth about him man can be! Aristotle worked out a philosophy of the First Cause that was, of course, far from the popular religion of his own Greek society and

culture. In his Metaphysics there is posited the Being who is pure actuality, and whose life is self-contemplating Thought. This Pure Act imparted movement to the universe by being desirable (“as the soul is attracted by beauty”). According to this, God never leaves the eternal repose in which His blessedness consists. Features of Aristotle’s theodicy are brilliant and have been appropriated by Christian thought, but its overall contrast with divine Revelation is obvious. The God who revealed himself to his chosen people is a living, dynamic, sovereign Person, with, notably, a heart. He has a heart. He is immensely compassionate and comes to the aid of the distressed. The prayer of Mary in the presence of her kinswoman Elizabeth (Luke 1: 46-55) sums up much of the doctrine on God in the Old Testament: He is mighty; he is holy, and he is *merciful*: “*his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation.*” He scatters the proud and “*has filled the hungry with good things.*” He has “*helped Israel his servant in remembrance of his mercy.*” This is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and for all

Aristotle's efforts to pierce the heart of things and get to the First Cause, the real First Cause was immensely more engaging project than he imagined. The God of the Hebrews is the Lord of the world and King of kings. He is holy and kind to those who fear him. He is near to man, indeed he described himself through the mouth of his prophets as Bridegroom to his people. His people is his spouse. This is language that never occurred to anyone and certainly not to the likes of Aristotle. God is King, but of a unique kind.

God's kingship is holy, merciful and compassionate. The Sacred Scriptures foretold the coming of the Messiah-King, and when he came he surpassed all predictions. Jesus is not only the Christ, but is the Son who reveals God his Father. This Jesus is the predicted King, and he came revealing and establishing the Kingdom of God his Father. It is the Kingdom of which he is the appointed King, in virtue not only of his divine Sonship, but in virtue of the sacrifice of himself for the salvation of the world. The idea of the Kingdom and his own position

as King is central to the New Testament — and therefore to the fulfilment of the Old. The recurring theme of Christ's preaching in the Gospels is the Kingdom of God. It will prevail over all other kingdoms, and it will never have an end. He himself is the King of kings and Lord of lords, and all authority has been given to him, risen from the dead and now in glory, but present in his body the Church. On this day we celebrate Jesus Christ as the King of kings. It is a profoundly Scriptural notion and image. It is at the heart of the Gospels, often repeated by St Paul, and is the fulfilment of "*all the Scriptures*," including "*Moses and all the prophets*" (Luke 24:27). St John wrote his Gospel so that we might believe that "*Jesus is the Christ (i.e., the Messiah-King), the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name*" (John 20: 31). The sign over the head of Christ as he lay dying on the cross — his royal crown, as it were — was "*Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews*." It was put there, ironically, by the Roman Empire which he, Jesus, would conquer by his word in the time to come. He is the King of compassionate love who,

as St Paul writes, “*though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich*” (2 Corinthians 8:9). Those who accept him in faith and share in his life know they must live as he did, loving and serving the least. So it is that Christ tells us what will be a key element of our Judgment when he comes as King and Judge at the end. It will hang, largely, on how we have served those in need. Whatever we do to the least, he, the King, will count as being done to him.

We read that at the Judgment, “*the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat.’*” That is the kind of King we love and serve. It is he who is Lord of the world. Let us remember that Christ our King is not speaking merely of physical hunger and need. It is especially the spiritual need of man that he came to remedy. It is especially (but not only) to the spiritual need of our neighbour that we

ourselves ought dedicate ourselves. We do this by bringing to the world the Person of Christ the King.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 25:31-46)

All authority One of the most prevalent intellectual and moral snares of the age in which we live is that of relativism. Modern Western man finds it difficult to admit the fact of absolutes, especially moral and religious absolutes. Characteristically his stance is a ‘liberal’ one, one that right to the end allows for the legitimacy of a contradiction to the ‘truth.’ Ultimately, his presumption is that all so called ‘truth’ is relative to the one making the claim. ‘Truth’ is, at bottom, a subjective phenomenon. Now, if such a presumption gains a hidden footing in a person’s mind and heart, it will be impossible to be a total Christian after the mind of Christ because Christ has made absolute claims. Being a Christian means accepting Christ on his terms which are absolute in character. A fundamental claim made by Christ and by the Church is

that Christ is the Lord of all. “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,*” the risen Jesus told his disciples. “*Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations.*” Therefore no other person in history, no other religious leader or teacher can be compared with him or raised to his rank. Christ is the universal King and Lord of Lords, and this is what we think of and celebrate today.

We ought pray for a deep conviction of this revealed truth, for it is only if we have this conviction that we shall be able to proclaim it to a world stamped by relativism. It is very difficult for modern man to accept that Christ has all authority and that his is the truth that is to guide mankind. There are many other claimants: Mahomet, Buddha, Confucius, and a long line of others. Let us renew our intention to bring the one King and Lord into our own lives, and by our example and words to all around us. As we read in today’s Gospel (Matthew 25:31-46), at the Judgment it is he and he alone who will decide.



Monday of the thirty-fourth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 85 (84):9 The Lord speaks of peace to his people and his holy ones and to those who turn to him.

Collect Stir up the will of your faithful, we pray, O Lord, that, striving more eagerly to bring your divine work to fruitful completion, they may receive in greater measure the healing remedies your kindness bestows. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Apocalypse 14:1-3.4-5; Psalm 23;
Luke 21:1-4

When Jesus looked up he saw some wealthy people putting their offerings into the treasury and he noticed a poor widow putting in two small coins. He said, "I tell you truly, this poor widow put in more than all the rest; for those others have all made offerings from their surplus

wealth, but she, from her poverty, has offered her whole livelihood.” (Luke 21:1-4)

The poor widow There is always the temptation to think that big is better. A bigger house is a better house. A bigger country is a better country. A bigger shopping mall is a better mall, a bigger company is a better company. A bigger landscape is a better landscape: who could improve on the great Niagara Falls? What is more breathtaking than the very size of the universe, almost incalculable in extent as it is — for will we ever know what is the ultimate star or planet? I remember when I first visited St Peter’s Basilica in Rome and I was deeply impressed by its majestic *size*. Its vast proportions had a memorable effect on me. If you see or meet a very tall and properly proportioned person who by his very *size* dominates the scene or the crowd, are you not very impressed? Perhaps you are instinctively led to expect that he will be “better” in some sense than a person who is physically somewhat diminutive. Put the two persons together, and without yet having engaged with each, what

will you expect? I think you will expect to be impressed more by the much bigger person. Experience of each may change that, but probably your initial assumption is that bigger is better. Consider the mark you might be leaving on things by your presence, your character and personality, and your daily work. You may hope that, in a fashion somewhat like the very big man who dominates the scene by his size, your presence and work will dominate the scene and attract the notice of many — and in that sense be “big.” If it is bigger it will be better. If it is small, it will be of little value. I suspect that this tends to be our assumption because we are creatures of *sense*. We start by taking in what we see, hear and feel. We tend not only to take this in but to be guided by it. If what we see is big, it strikes our imagination accordingly and, if we do not think carefully, our intellect and judgment too. In 1973 a famous book was published: *Small Is Beautiful: Economics As If People Mattered*. It is a collection of essays by the British economist E. F. Schumacher. It resisted the economic assumption that a big output with big technology is what

matters. Rather, let there be small units within big businesses, and let those small units become beautiful, and make the big beautiful.

Schumacher tells us that man is actually small, and therefore small is beautiful. I am not suggesting that Schumacher's fundamental philosophy on the human being is in *all* respects correct. But I do suggest that we be aware of, and beware of, our tendency to think that bigger is better. Let us re-frame Schumacher's caption to, "small *can* be beautiful" — but of course what is big can be beautiful too. What is small can be ugly, and man who is small can be ugly too. All of this brings us to our Gospel passage today (Luke 21:1-4), in which our Lord is shown in the Temple, watching people contributing to the Treasury. He "*saw some wealthy people putting their offerings into the treasury*" — their contributions were big, and therefore they themselves and probably those observing them thought that those big contributions were better. Not only were their big contributions deemed to be better, but they were deemed to be better persons too, as a result of their

bigger contributions. Not so, for we read our Lord's judgment on the scene: *"he noticed a poor widow putting in two small coins. He said, 'I tell you truly, this poor widow put in more than all the rest; for those others have all made offerings from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has offered her whole livelihood'"* (Luke 21:1-4). In this case, small was certainly beautiful, and it was much, much more beautiful than the much bigger. So we have it from the lips not just of a human philosopher but from the incarnate Son of God himself, that small can be very beautiful indeed. In God's sight, that poor widow far surpassed the rich in her contributions. This ought to be very consoling to the average human being, and the overwhelming proportion of the human race is made up of the very little people, with not a lot with which to make of their lives something beautiful, indeed very beautiful. How can they do it? They do it by giving to God all they have to live on, such as it is. This they do by doing, to the best of their ability and with the aid of his grace, the will of God as it is manifested to them in the duties of their daily life.

What is my duty here and now and today? I shall do my very best with this and give my all to fulfilling it, and I shall do this because God wants me to.

That poor widow, whom our Lord saw and held up before his disciples, is the heroine for the Everyman who has before him his ordinary life, with all its ordinary humdrum. We need not be big in order to be better — better, that is, than what we might be. The way to be “better” is to make beautiful the small reality we see ourselves to be. This we can do — and the widow of our Gospel passage did it. Our Lord called to his side not the King Herods, not the chief priests and Temple aristocracy, not the Caesars, but the *little* people. In fact, the big people have to become small to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. It is the little ones, who, if they take up the call to be Christ’s disciples, can make of their lives and all of creation, something very, very beautiful for God.

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Second reflection: (Luke 21:1-4)

“She from the little she had has put in all she had to live on.” One of the very insidious dangers to the spiritual life of the Christian is the feeling of *futility*. A sense of futility can pervade and cripple a person’s efforts to spend his life doing work for God. One’s efforts can seem so inconsequential, so lacking in obvious fruit. It may seem that others have been far more blessed with success, and a form of bitterness can set in, or at least a languor in the face of past failures and present difficulties. One’s efforts seem to have been a non-event, or worse. It can be discouraging, especially if one is often comparing oneself with others — which, of course, one should not be doing. Our Gospel today (Luke 21: 1-4) reminds us that God does not compare us with others. He looks at our heart. Our Lord was sitting in the Temple and watching the rich put a great deal into the Treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in hardly anything. What she put in would have made hardly any difference. Some would have thought it was worthless. But Our Lord made a different

judgment. What she put in, he said, amounted to more than any of the others. Why? Because she gave to God all she had to live on.

This should be very consoling to the little person who thinks he has little to show for all his efforts. What God wants is that we give our all, and that we give it to him like the poor widow. He then will do the rest. Let us resolve to love God with our whole being, and to show this love for him in the dedication with which we fulfil his will in our daily work. If we do this, our lives will receive the praise that was given to the poor widow.



Tuesday of the thirty-fourth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 85 (84):9 The Lord speaks of peace to his people and his holy ones and to those who turn to him.

Collect Stir up the will of your faithful, we pray, O Lord, that, striving more eagerly to bring your divine work to fruitful completion, they may receive in greater measure the healing remedies your kindness bestows. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Apocalypse 14:14-19; Psalm 95;

Luke 21:5-11

With some people saying of the temple that it was adorned with valuable stones and gifts, Jesus said “These things which you see, the days will come in which there will not be left a stone upon a stone that will not be thrown down.” They asked him, “Master, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign when they will begin to

take place?” He replied, “Take heed lest you be seduced; for many will come in my name, saying, I am he; and the time is at hand. Do not go after them. And when you hear of wars and seditions, do not be terrified. These things must first come to pass but the end is not so soon.” Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be great earthquakes in divers places, and plagues and famines and terrors from the heavens, and there will be great signs.” (Luke 21:5-11)

He is Lord The present tends to be seen as everything, because the present is all that actually is. So we who live in the present (as we must), tend to think that what is present is more important and more “real” — in the sense of more enduring — than whatever else has been or will be. For example, at this point of time in history, the United States of America is the most powerful nation on the globe, despite its present ominous and potentially catastrophic debt. But the time may come when it is but a minor power. Impossible? Hard to imagine? Perhaps, but remember the well-nigh invincible power of classical

Rome and the long dominance of that city over the civilized world. At the time of Rome's ascendancy, the Macedon and Greece of Alexander the Great were a shadow of their former selves. The Jews presumed to revolt against it, and were utterly crushed — the holy City with its grand Temple being left an extensive dump yard littered with smouldering ruins. The United States has dominated the recent stage for very many decades, but its dominance cannot be compared with that of classical Rome — and consider the doldrums into which Rome has sunk since then, and look at Rome now! It is but one of many cities of the world with no military power to speak of, its most significant feature being, and having long been, the *papacy*. Kingdoms rise and fall. I remember, when I was finishing my schooling, the Modern History teacher telling us that *China* will be the nation to watch in the future. This is possible. Will China (and India) dominate the military and political scene in years to come, with the United States falling into decline? We cannot say, but a mere smattering of knowledge of history ought teach us that we cannot

invest enduring hope in the centres of strength around us at any point of time, on this our earthly stage. The picture of much of history is as our Lord describes it in our Gospel today: *“Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be great earthquakes in divers places, and plagues and famines and terrors from the heavens, and there will be great signs”* (Luke 21:5-11). We cannot, as the Psalmist puts it, trust in chariots nor in horses for they will fail. Our trust has to be, rather, in the name of the Lord our God (Psalm 20).

In our Gospel scene today our Lord is with some people who remark to him on the dazzling beauty of the Temple in Jerusalem. Our Lord predicts its crash. It will be swept away, and *“there will not be left a stone upon a stone that will not be thrown down”* — and how like the monuments and shrines of so many of man’s religions this is. Our Lord is here saying this of the greatest shrine of the ancient world, the Temple of Jerusalem. It was the greatest, not only as Herod’s magnificent building, but the greatest in the sense that, as our Lord said, it was the House

of his, Jesus Christ's, heavenly Father. For a thousand years it had been the special dwelling place of the true God, confirmed as such by the prophets and above all by Jesus Christ himself. It would be smashed to pieces. But what our Lord then says is important for the men and women of every age: *"many will come in my name, saying, I am he; and the time is at hand. Do not go after them. And when you hear of wars and seditions, do not be terrified. These things must first come to pass but the end is not so soon."* That is to say, amid the vicissitudes of this life and amid the numerous claimants for attention and allegiance, we have a sure Hope. It is Jesus Christ, the Lord of the world, the Lord of history, and the Lord of each and every human being. *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,"* he said on having risen from the dead (Matthew 28:18). This sure Stay is ever at hand, ever near, ever accessible, ever kind and compassionate to the little person who is so easily swept away, beneath the ebb and flow of the tides of history. We may sink like a stone, seemingly without trace. Our mark may be quickly

forgotten. I knew a wonderful lady once who cheerfully endured great trials in her marriage. The tiny plaque over her grave does her no justice. There may even be no gravestone to perpetuate one's memory. But if we have clung to the One who is the one enduring Master and Lord, all will be well. With him we shall reign. As St Thomas More, who took four centuries to be canonized, said: "I may lose my head, but I'll come to no harm." Let us, every day, connect profoundly with the One who is the Foundation, the Centre, the Height and the Depth. Jesus Christ our Brother and our God, our Redeemer and our King, is the One with whom we must remain profoundly connected in knowledge and love. All else may buffet us and pull us hither and thither, or may deal with us graciously, as the case may be. But the one thing we can be sure of, is the love of Jesus Christ through whom all things have come to be. He is our life and our light. Let us then resolve to know, love and serve him above all else.

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Second reflection:

The Kingdom There is in the Book of Daniel one of the many Old Testament prophecies of the coming Kingdom of God. God would set up a Kingdom which would never be destroyed. The great expectation lived on among the people: a Kingdom was coming which would last forever (Daniel 2: 44). Finally the time came, and the angel Gabriel appeared to the Virgin Mary and informed her that God wished her to be the mother of the Messiah. His would be the throne of David his father, and of his Kingdom there would be no end. John the Baptist came preaching that the Messiah was nigh, and our Lord told the people that the Kingdom of God was among them. As Our Lord once told his disciples, prophets and kings longed to see the day of Christ, and never saw it. We are children of this Kingdom. In a certain sense there is nothing further, essentially, for us to await or expect: only the fulfilment of what has already arrived. That fulfilment will find its definitive expression in the final glorious coming of Christ. But we are in the end times now. We have “the goods”

now. The “goods” are contained in the Person of Christ. In having Christ, we have every heavenly blessing. What we must do is put it all vigorously to work while we have life and breath. There is no further searching for the ultimate meaning of things nor for the more ultimate blessings attainable. We have Christ. He is our all. Our task is to get to know, love and serve him as perfectly as possible, and to bring the knowledge of him to as many as possible, so that they too may be children of this promised Kingdom that has arrived.

The tension now lies, not in awaiting something vague and ill-defined that the heart longs for and which has yet to come. Rather, it is that of seeking the perfect fulfilment, in our hearts and in our world, of the reign of Christ which has already arrived. That reign will reach its fulfilment and it will last forever. Assuredly so. This has been promised. The task is to ensure that we all are fully part of it. So then, now I begin!



Wednesday of the thirty-fourth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 85 (84):9 The Lord speaks of peace to his people and his holy ones and to those who turn to him.

Collect Stir up the will of your faithful, we pray, O Lord, that, striving more eagerly to bring your divine work to fruitful completion, they may receive in greater measure the healing remedies your kindness bestows. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Apocalypse 15:1-4; Psalm 97;

Luke 21:12-19

Jesus said, But before all this, they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. This will result in your being witnesses to them. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend

yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. All men will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. By standing firm you will gain life. (Luke 21:12-19)

Christian witness We naturally tend to underestimate the difficulties ahead. A student has just finished his Honours degree and enrolls for his Ph.D., eagerly anticipating interesting research and writing ahead, and coming out of the long process with the letters to his name. But he strikes problem after problem. He has intellectual impasses, and his moderator is not very helpful either — indeed, his moderator finds the business a tiresome distraction from his own research. The Ph.D. project becomes something of a nightmare, and he gradually gives it away. He had no idea of the difficulties — all he thought of were the joys. Or again, a couple gets married, and the wedding is a wonderful occasion. The

husband is gradually discovered to be moody, irascible, religiously neglectful, and over the years a tremendous trial to his very good wife. She had no idea what was ahead — but she is faithful and gradually wins him back to a life of greater responsibility. Both had little expectation of the difficulties of marriage — all they thought of were the joys. In her case, the sufferings were very great and yet she ends her life undaunted in her kindness and good cheer. Or again, Southern Sudan breaks off from the North, and launches into its own independence. The joys ahead, the joys of freedom to choose, and the joys of freedom from past oppression, are what fill the minds of the new population. But ah! Difficulties then arise and will arise. So it has generally been in the history of man, and it is no surprise that our Lord solemnly issues the warning to his disciples of grave difficulties for them ahead. John the Baptist went into the region about the Jordan, preaching repentance and the coming of the salvation of God. All were to prepare. The people were in expectation — and John indicates who it is who will make this happen.

Andrew meets Jesus, and goes to his brother Simon with the joyful news, and brings him to Jesus. Philip brings Nathanael: “*We have found him of whom Moses spoke in the Law and the prophets also*” — “*come and see,*” he tells him (John 1: 40-46). The joy of the new beginning is contagious. It is about Jesus of Nazareth, who then rapidly far surpasses John. He announces the coming of “*the Kingdom*” — the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven. Indeed, in him the Kingdom has in some way arrived.

One gets the impression, “reading between the lines” of the Gospel narrative, that the disciples had little sense of there being difficulties ahead. It was the joy of the Kingdom, and Jesus their Master would be the King. On one occasion the mother of the sons of Zebedee came with her two sons — who would in time prove to be magnificent — to ask a favour. What do you want me to do for you? Jesus asked. They wanted to be allotted the place at his right and left in his glory. That was the Kingdom for them: he was the absolute Centre, but they wanted the joy of

being at his very side. They looked to the joys, and had no idea of the difficulties. But whatever about the difficulties inherent in any important project, whether it be a higher degree, or some special work, or a marriage, in the business of serving at the side of Jesus Christ and following in his footsteps to the end, there are difficulties of a special order. That would seem to be the message that our Lord strove to convey to his wide-eyed, ardent, generous, and as yet naive disciples. Perhaps Judas Iscariot was shrewd enough to see some of the difficulties — and did not like it. Who knows! Our Lord began to insist with his disciples: he was going to his doom. That is, he would be delivered up to his enemies. He would be rejected by the highest in the nation, and especially by them. He would be put through a terrible end, an end that would assuredly come. He would be strung up. But then *on the third day he would rise again* — but they could not grasp all this. It was beyond them. Further, our Lord took pains to tell them that their lot in due course would be similar. He was clear about it: “*they will lay hands on you*

and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name.” By his own death he would bear witness to the truth of his Person and saving mission, and their coming sufferings would also be the occasion of their bearing witness. *“This will result in your being witnesses to them. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict”* (Luke 21: 12-19).

We need to pray about this, and we need to pray for it — by that I mean that we need to pray for the grace to appreciate our Lord’s words, to accept them, and for the grace of his help in the doing of it. That is to say, we must pray for the grace of the Holy Spirit to accept and embrace the special difficulties of witnessing to Jesus Christ, to his revelation and to his Church, that Church which is the divinely-instituted conduit of his grace and teaching to the world. Let us pray for the grace to bear successful witness

to Jesus Christ amid the predicted difficulties. Our greatest calling is to follow the Master in his Passion, Death and Resurrection. Thus shall we reign!

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Second reflection: (Luke 21:12-19)

“Men will seize you and persecute you; .. and that will be your opportunity to bear witness” One of the most mysterious things in life is difficulty and suffering, especially when it seems to be undeserved. Cardinal Newman regarded it as, potentially, a tremendous obstacle to belief in God. He wrote that were it not for the unmistakable testimony of his Conscience, the fact of evil would lead him to unbelief. Good people who try to obey God and follow their conscience will experience suffering and evil. Why is this, when there is a good God? We do not know, but there are various hints given by Our Lord which help us make sense of it. Today Our Lord warns his disciples that persecution and suffering await them precisely because of their fidelity to him — they “*will*

bring you before kings and governors because of my name". What is the meaning of this? It will *"be your opportunity to bear witness"* (Luke 21: 12-19). This is very important when we think of the things that have happened, do happen, and will happen to us. All such circumstances will be opportunities to do good for others, and the greatest good will be that of bearing witness to Christ and his truth. The supremely adverse circumstance will be the unjust taking away of one's life *"because of my name"* — and this witness will constitute martyrdom. Now, this witness can be given in all sorts of ordinary ways in the midst of everyday difficulties — difficulties such as sickness, contradictions, clashes of personality, difficulties in work, or whatever. Every difficulty in life will be *"your opportunity to bear witness."* And Christ's help will be with us *"because I myself will give you an eloquence and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to resist or contradict."* Let us then rely on the help of Our Lord as we turn all occasions into opportunities to bear witness.



Thursday of the thirty-fourth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 85 (84):9 The Lord speaks of peace to his people and his holy ones and to those who turn to him.

Collect Stir up the will of your faithful, we pray, O Lord, that, striving more eagerly to bring your divine work to fruitful completion, they may receive in greater measure the healing remedies your kindness bestows. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Apocalypse 18:1-2.21-23;19:1-3.9;

Psalm 99; Luke 21:20-28

Jesus said, When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. For this is the time of punishment in fulfilment of all that has been written. How dreadful it will be in those

days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. (Luke 21:20-28)

He will come We notice distinct components in Luke's account of our Lord's words to his disciples about the End — it is usually called his "eschatological discourse." Luke's presentation of it (21: 6-36) goes for some 31 verses, while Matthew's for some 43 verses (Matthew 24: 2-44). The two are quite similar. Mark's

goes for 35 verses (13: 2-37). Luke's text (as does Matthew) begins with his prediction of the destruction of the magnificent Temple, with all its "*noble stones and offerings.*" The days will come when "*there shall not be left one stone upon another that will not be thrown down*" (21: 5-6). Then he refers to "*wars and tumults*" — they were not to be "*terrified; for this must first take place, but the end will not be at once*" (21: 9). Conflicts between nations and natural disasters are then described, and "*terrors and great signs from heaven.*" Christ's disciples will be severely persecuted "*for my name's sake. This will be a time for you to bear testimony....By your endurance you will gain your lives*" (21: 10-19). In our passage today which is the immediate sequel, our Lord seems to repeat in different words the two elements of turmoil he has just mentioned. There will be the utter destruction of the Holy City. When armies begin to surround it, his disciples are to depart, for "*Jerusalem will be trampled down by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled*" (21: 20-24). Then our Lord passes once more to the general

cosmic upheaval, with *“men fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world”* (21: 25-26). The wages of sin, then, are being paid. The Temple and its City will fall, and in time so will the world. All will crack, rend asunder and implode, for because of sin, the system of things is separated from its only Source, the God who sustains and loves it. Most seriously, as St John says in his Prologue — *“he came unto his own and his own did not receive him... the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us”* (John 1: 11-14). Our Lord’s words portray those faithful to him, as being in a world that is at odds with God and Jesus Christ, and therefore with them. They cannot rely on things or persons about them, but only on their Master who will come at the End. He is their Stay and their sure Hope.

The notable thing about the vivid description of the “wars and tumults” and the “terrors and great signs” is the coming of Jesus Christ as Lord. All things may pass away, but Jesus Christ will not. He is the Lord, and in his hands there rests all authority in heaven and on earth. With him

there is all power and all glory. Hence whatever we see *“coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken,”* in Jesus Christ there is an absolute anchor. *“Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near”* (Luke 21:20-28). All will be well for those who place their trust and allegiance in him. In Matthew’s account of Christ’s trial, our Lord stood before the Sanhedrin and was put under oath to declare whether he claimed to be both the Messiah and the very Son of the Living God (and therefore possessing the nature of God). That was the one moment amid the various accusations when he did speak (Matthew 26: 63-64). He answered the high priest with the utmost clarity, knowing that he was freely delivering himself into their hands: *“you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.”* Luke’s account is a

little different, but Christ's testimony about himself is the same: the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God. Luke, indeed, makes the interrogation clearer still: "*they all said, 'Are you the Son of God, then?' And he said to them, 'You say that I am.' And they said, 'What further testimony do we need? We have heard it ourselves from his own lips'*" (Luke 22: 69-71). In our Gospel today, our Lord's prediction of the End has its climax in the coming of the Son of Man "*in a cloud with power and great glory.*" He is coming, not only as the Son of Man of the Book of Daniel, but as God our Judge. But when that happens, his disciples are to "*stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near*" (Luke 21:20-28). Christ's coming is to be a cause of rejoicing for those who have accepted him.

Christ is the great Foundation on whom all may rely. The "eschatological discourse" of Jesus Christ about the End Times, adds this singular feature to the various apocalyptic descriptions and passages of the Old Testament: the defining element is the Person of Jesus

Christ. All of history looks to his final coming, and the entire life of each individual ought have his coming at the end of life as its defining pole. Let us so live as to be ready for the Bridegroom when he comes. When he comes, the cry will go out: the Bridegroom is here! Go out to meet him. Let us live in such a way as always to be ready, whenever be the day, whenever the moment.

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Second reflection: (Luke 21:20-28)

“Then you will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.” If we are to be Christians with a profound and clear-sighted conviction, we have to be alert to the hidden assumptions of our culture that can undermine firm convictions. They are the starting points that ground beliefs and values. They are the first principles of social and individual action. Now, one of the most pervasive assumptions, a position that is widely taken for granted, is that truth is *relative* to each person. It is widely assumed that what each person regards as the

truth is simply a personal and subjective opinion about the truth. Objective truth, it is widely assumed, is unattainable in matters philosophical and religious, including the ultimate issue, God. If we are not careful, we will slip into assuming this ourselves, without quite realising it. If this happens, we can find ourselves reluctant to believe that there is one Lord and King, to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been granted. We can be reluctant to think this with firmness and conviction, simply because others deny it or are sceptical about it. The effect of this denial can be that we can fail in firmness of belief. In the book of Daniel we read the testimony of King Darius that the God of Daniel is “*the living God, he endures forever, his sovereignty will never be destroyed, and his kingship never end*” (Daniel 6). In our Gospel passage Our Lord assures us (Luke 21: 20-28) that all “*will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory*”. Jesus Christ is Lord. Let us ask the Holy Spirit to give us an unshakeable conviction of this, and to bring it to others.



Friday of the thirty-fourth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 85 (84):9 The Lord speaks of peace to his people and his holy ones and to those who turn to him.

Collect Stir up the will of your faithful, we pray, O Lord, that, striving more eagerly to bring your divine work to fruitful completion, they may receive in greater measure the healing remedies your kindness bestows. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Apocalypse 20:1-4.11-21:2; Psalm 83;
Luke 21:29-33

Jesus told them this parable: Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have

happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. (Luke 21:29-33)

The Kingdom is near In 1927 Monsignor Georges Lemaître, a Belgian physicist and Catholic priest, proposed that the receding movement of the spiral galaxies from the Earth was due to the expansion of the Universe. In 1931 he went further and suggested that the evident expansion of the Universe, if projected back in time, meant that the further in the past, the smaller the Universe was. At some finite time in the past, all the mass of the Universe was concentrated into a single point, a “primeval atom” where and when the fabric of time and space came into existence. After World War II, two distinct possibilities for explaining the development of the Universe emerged. One was Fred Hoyle’s model of a steady state in the Universe — which had long prevailed. In this model, the Universe is roughly the same at any point in time. The other was Monsignor Lemaître’s *Big Bang* theory — he himself termed the event the “big noise.” Astrophysicist Fred Hoyle, who (of course) disliked the idea, designated

the creation event as a “Big Bang” (in a Radio broadcast in 1949). So, ironically, it was Hoyle who coined the phrase that came to be applied to Monsignor Lemaître’s theory. The Big Bang is now viewed as the best theory of the origin and evolution of the cosmos, but even so, little is claimed to be known scientifically about the earliest moments of the Universe’s history. In the 1920s and 1930s almost every major cosmologist preferred an eternal steady state Universe, and several complained that the beginning of time implied by the Big Bang imported religious concepts into physics. This perception was enhanced by the fact that the originator of the Big Bang theory, physicist Georges Lemaître, was nothing other than a Catholic priest. Pope Pius XII declared, at the 1951 opening meeting of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, that the Big Bang theory accorded with Catholic teaching on creation. Now, why do I mention all this? The Big Bang is an *hypothesis* — like Evolution — to help in understanding the origin of the world and in accounting for its present process. What it does illustrate is the amazing fecundity and power which

God has planted in material creation, which he sustains by his almighty touch. The world is capable, by the power of the loving Creator who continually supports it, of amazing transformations and development.

Of course, to appreciate this we do not have to have recourse to scientific hypotheses involving astronomy and the origins of the Universe. As St John Henry Newman wrote in one of his sermons (PPS IV, 13), *“Once only in the year, yet once, does the world which we see show forth its hidden powers, and in a manner manifest itself. Then the leaves come out, and the blossoms on the fruit trees, and flowers; and the grass and corn spring up. There is a sudden rush and burst outwardly of that hidden life which God has lodged in the material world. Well, that shows you, as by a sample, what it can do at God’s command, when He gives the word. This earth, which now buds forth in leaves and blossoms, will one day burst forth into a new world of light and glory, in which we shall see Saints and Angels dwelling.”* Were we not to have had constant experience of the change in nature, we would scarcely

imagine such great changes to be possible. As said just above, the world is capable, by God's power, of amazing transformations. My point here, though, is that this feature of change to something higher and better is a harbinger of the greatest thing that is to come: the Kingdom of God. Thus are we brought to our Gospel passage today (Luke 21: 29-33). The problem with us moderns is that we assume that this world is really all that there is. But our experience of this changing and surprising world, and our speculations on its processes, ought suggest to us that what is ultimately coming could far surpass anything we now imagine. In our Gospel today our Lord is speaking of the Kingdom of God — in Matthew, it is called the Kingdom of Heaven. The Kingdom of God is the goal of human history. It is the goal of each individual life. It was the goal of our Lord's mission. It was the object of his preaching. He wished all to prepare for the Kingdom of God, and its fulfilment would occur at the end of time when this world will pass away and be transformed into something truly glorious. If we look back, and choose to

understand the world in terms of the Big Bang, or if we look at our world from year to year, remarkable change is, we might say, a matter of course. Our Lord is assuring us that the most remarkable changes are yet to come. *“Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.”* Essentially, the Kingdom of God is present in its fullness in the Person of Jesus Christ. It extends when a person enters into union with him and begins to share his life by grace. Christ has commissioned the Church, his mystical body, to bring him to the whole world and to make disciples of all the nations. At the end, he will come in power and glory, and then his Kingdom will have no end. God will be all in all — and how terrible for those who have refused the Kingdom! Let us resolve to enter it and to live accordingly. This Kingdom is the goal of all, and is the ultimate purpose of all that God is doing in and for his creation.

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Second Reflection

Messiah It is very profitable to meditate on the titles that are used for Our Lord in the New Testament. St John the Baptist referred to Our Lord as *the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*. He directed the people's attention away from himself, stating that he was not the Christ, but that the Christ was about to come. Our Lord challenged the scribes and the Pharisees to consider what John had said in pointing to him. They and the people asked Our Lord if he was *the Messiah* who was to come. Our Lord was reluctant to answer because of the kind of person all expected the Messiah to be. So then, what titles did Our Lord give to himself? The most common was "*the Son of Man*", and in the Book of Daniel, the prophet foresees the eventual coming of the "Son of Man" (Daniel 7: 2-14). The coming of the "Son of Man" that the prophet Daniel here foresees is clearly his final coming. Our Lord refers to this at times in the Gospels — notably at the beginning of his Passion, when on trial before the leaders of the people who were about to

condemn him to death. In Daniel's vision kingdoms will rise and fall, but finally the One of great age will take his seat to judge. The beast will be killed, and then on the clouds of heaven will come "*one like a son of man.*" On him will be conferred "*an eternal sovereignty which shall never pass away*". The One predicted in this splendid passage is Jesus Christ, our Lord.

In placing our faith in him and in cleaving to him in our daily life, we entrust ourselves to the One who will take us safely through the vicissitudes of history into an eternity of absolute security. The divine Son of Man is our Brother, and the Lord of lords and King of kings. Let us dwell on the vision of the Son of Man described by Daniel, for it is how our Lord referred repeatedly to himself. If Our Lord loved to use the title, we ought love to think of it.



Saturday of the thirty-fourth week in Ordinary Time

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 85 (84):9 The Lord speaks of peace to his people and his holy ones and to those who turn to him.

Collect Stir up the will of your faithful, we pray, O Lord, that, striving more eagerly to bring your divine work to fruitful completion, they may receive in greater measure the healing remedies your kindness bestows. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Apocalypse 22:1-7; Psalm 94;

Luke 21:34-36

Jesus said to his disciples, Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap. For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth. Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is

about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man. (Luke 21:34-36)

On the watch The human eye is a complex organ that enables us to see physical reality. Just like every other organ in our bodies, the eye is susceptible to a variety of diseases. Glaucoma is a common disease that is characterized by a group of conditions that slowly deteriorate the optic nerve, eventually causing blindness. It is the second leading cause of blindness and is typically caused, but not always, by abnormally high pressure inside the eye called intraocular pressure. A person may not notice any signs or symptoms. For many, by the time glaucoma is discovered, it is already at advanced stages. Damage done by glaucoma cannot be reversed but may be slowed with the proper treatment. Cataracts are another common disorder that affect the eyes and are described as a clouding of the generally clear lens of the eye. Macular degeneration is a condition of the eye that damages the core of the retina, which is called the macula. Damage to the retina can make it increasingly more difficult to see fine

details. With macular degeneration, damage is also done to the area around blood vessels that supply the macula. These are instances of the gradual loss of the power to see physically, and they each require different strategies to halt the loss, or with some, to regain vision. But now, there is, in a higher sense, a very common gradual loss of vision. It is the loss of the power to *see spiritually*, to see the things that God would have us especially perceive. These things are of maximum importance. Many with excellent physical sight are simultaneously suffering a silent but relentless loss of spiritual sight, and they do not know it. What is worse, they do not care. One of the most important things to do when it comes to the preservation of physical sight — as with health generally — is to be on the look-out for tell-tale symptoms. Check-ups with the appropriate experts ought be regular. In other words, as the years advance, a person ought be on the watch lest a deterioration set in which can reach such a pass as to be irreversible. This having been said, a major problem is that

many think that the only important dimension to health is the physical — because it is this life alone that matters.

The fact is, that as a person advances in years, if he does not look out, slowly and silently a serious spiritual decay can set in. Of course, it is very possible that due to parental and educational neglect, a young person may never launch into a substantial spiritual and religious life. But even if a beginning has been made in a genuine relationship with God, this can — as with physical health — deteriorate, become diseased and fade completely away. The serious feature of this is that, especially due to declining interest in one's spiritual life and health — because one's interests lie elsewhere — all this may be little noticed, and what little is noticed may be left unattended. A person reaches the age of fifty, or sixty or more, and his life has become filled with various interests and ambitions (or perhaps relatively empty of them), and things that are of God fade from the horizon. He is becoming blind and does not know it. Pressure from the things of this world are seriously affecting the eye of the

soul, and spiritual glaucoma sets in. Or to use another image, the lens of the soul is becoming clouded and a cataract is veiling the heart. As said above, not only is there the loss of vision, but there is the loss of interest to do something about it. Life rapidly passes, and its end looms ahead, either suddenly or gradually as the case may be. By then the person has lost his spiritual sight, or it may be seriously impaired. He is helpless in the midst of his spiritual disease, and cannot rise to the occasion of the coming “of the Son of Man.” Somehow grace has to penetrate the blindness, and if there is simply no response from the person himself, what can be done? His sorry state is the fruit of a vast number of previous neglects and refusals. All of this reminds us of the critical importance of our Lord’s words in today’s Gospel: *“Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap. For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth. Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to*

escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21: 34-36).

Be always on the watch, our Lord tells us. How can we do this? We do it especially by cultivating an abiding spirit of prayer day by day. Let us strive every day to live in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is God-with-us. Let us take practical steps to grow in this habit. As soon as we awake in the morning, let our firm habit be to turn to God in prayer immediately. Let us raise our minds and hearts to God very frequently during the day amid our work. If we wake at night, well, let us turn our hearts to God then too. There are many means of being ever on the watch to ensure we live in the state of grace, but daily and frequent prayer is essential among them.

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Second reflection: (Luke 21:34-36)

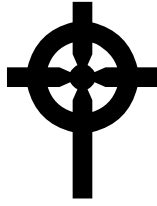
“Stay awake, praying at all times for the strength to survive all that is going to happen”

At the end, Christ will come in glory to judge the living and the dead, and of his kingdom there will be no end. This is what we profess in the Nicene Creed. In the Book of Daniel we read that *“His sovereignty is an eternal sovereignty and every empire will serve and obey him”* (Daniel 7: 15 27). This is what Our Lord prophesied of himself: he will come again to judge all the nations, the living and the dead. Well then, what are we to do about this? We do not know when Christ will come again to judge. Our Lord, when asked, replied that no one knows when this will be, only the Father. It can happen any time, so we should live in the light of that fact. It means, to use the words of Our Lord himself in today’s Gospel, *“Watch yourselves, or your hearts will be coarsened, ... and that day will be sprung on you suddenly, like a trap”* (Luke 21: 34-36). We are to live in such a way that were Christ to

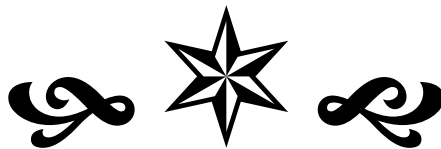
come suddenly, now, today, or this week, we would be ready, and would be able “*to stand with confidence before the Son of Man.*” More than this, the thought of being ever ready for Christ’s coming, ought impel us to be apostolic so that others too, as many as possible, will likewise be able to stand with confidence before the Son of Man.

Let us live in the thought of the coming of Christ. He comes every day to us in his grace, in his word, and in the Sacraments of the Church. He will come at our death, and none of us knows when that will occur. He will come at the end, whenever the end will be and none of us knows when that will be. We ought so live for Christ as to be ready for him, and we ought bring the good news of Christ to others, as many as possible, so that they too will be able to stand ready.





Feast Days & Solemnities



Solemnity of Mary the Mother of God (January 1)

Entrance Antiphon Hail, Holy Mother, who gave birth to the King, who rules heaven and earth for ever.

Or:

Cf. Is 9:1, 5; Lk 1:33 Today a light will shine upon us, for the Lord is born for us; and he will be called Wondrous God, Prince of peace, Father of future ages: and his reign will be without end.

Collect O God, who through the fruitful virginity of Blessed Mary bestowed on the human race the grace of eternal salvation, grant, we pray, that we may experience the intercession of her, through whom we were found worthy to receive the author of life, our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8;
Galatians 4:47; Luke 2:1 21

So the shepherds hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived. (Luke 2:16-21)

Mother of God I have been to what are regarded as the ruins of the Church of Mary (Meryem Kilisesi) in Ephesus, Turkey. It is also known as the Double Church, because it is thought that one aisle was dedicated to the Virgin and the other to St. John. It is known, too, as the Council Church because the Council of Ephesus is believed to have been held there. The First Council of Ephesus was the third ecumenical council of the early Church, held in

431 at that Church of Mary in Ephesus. The Council was called amid a dispute over the teachings of Nestorius, the Patriarch of the imperial city of Constantinople. Nestorius taught that Mary, the mother of Jesus gave birth to what we might call the human Christ, but not to the divine *Logos* (Word) who existed before Mary and indeed before time itself. The *Logos*, present in Jesus, replaced and dispensed with a human soul in him. Consequently, Mary should be called *Christotokos*, the “Christ-bearer,” and not *Theotokos*, Greek for the “God bearer.” That was Nestorius’s theory. The question immediately arose, then, if Jesus had no human soul, how could he possibly be man? Cyril of Alexandria insisted that Nestorianism denied that Jesus was both human and divine. Under Cyril’s presidency, the Council of Ephesus denounced Nestorius’ teaching as erroneous and decreed that Jesus was one person and not two, and he was complete God and complete man, with a rational soul and body. Therefore the Virgin Mary was to be called *Theotokos* — the bearer of God, as she had been commonly referred to. Of course,

the Council meant by this that Mary is the Mother of the Son of God become man. The Second divine Person took to himself a fully human nature (including a human soul) while retaining his own divine nature. This was essentially the authoritative resolution of a controversy over the Person of Jesus Christ, with immediate implications (of course) for the Church's doctrine on Christ's most holy mother. In our own day I have seen on the Internet certain Protestant teachers giving talks on Christian doctrine who deny that Mary is the Mother of God. These appear to accept that Jesus Christ is God, but they have a poor understanding of the details and implications of this doctrine.

I have also read accounts that consider Mary to have been nothing more than a kind of physical receptacle of the embryo of the incarnate God, placed in her by the Holy Spirit. She, in this account, is not truly the "mother" of God become man, but only the bearer of him. She was basically his carriage taking him from conception to birth. The divinely-created seed did not unite with the motherly

element to bring about the Incarnation in the womb. Rather, the womb of Mary simply received the formed embryo by an act of heaven. In effect, she did not truly conceive her divine Son. But no — this is absolutely not true. It is wrong, for the doctrine of Scripture and the Church is that Mary truly conceived in her womb. However, she conceived not by an act of man but by the power of the Holy Spirit. The role of any mother in giving life to her child was exercised by Mary, but in her case there was no intervention of man. As the Angel said, “*You shall conceive and bear a son, and give him the name Jesus.*” At her inquiry as to how this was to happen, for she had no relations with man, the Angel explained: “*The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; hence, the holy offspring to be born will be called Son of God*” (Luke 1: 30-35). At her consent, her Child — truly her Child — was conceived as One profoundly shaped by what she, as mother, instantly transmitted to him. Her DNA, and other elements any child would draw from his mother, were drawn from her by

this Child in her womb. We may also add that inasmuch as there was no human father involved, the level of gift to the Child by her as mother must have been so much greater. How appropriate, then, was it that she was full of grace, and sinless from her own conception! How similar to his mother must Jesus have been in so many respects! Divine Person as he was, he had her, his creature, for his human parent. Her life and constitution nourished him, but of course in her own blood there flowed the generations of the past back to David, back to Abraham, and back to Adam and Eve. Jesus Christ was Son of God and Son of Mary — and being Son of Mary he was a true descendant of Adam, and was therefore our brother.

Generally speaking, the first thing that man thinks of when he thinks of God — or his gods — is great *power*. God has revealed that he is *almighty* in power. His power is *boundless*. The greatest act of God's power is the Incarnation. How could pure and simple Being, lacking all potential because of its lack of all limit, become a finite man who could suffer and die? However we tentatively

explain the fact (such as, through recourse to the distinction between person and nature), fact it was and is. God the Son became man. *The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. His glory was seen, the glory of the Only-begotten Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.* Mary is truly his mother. *Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death!*

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Second reflection: (Luke 2:16-21)

The secret of Mary At the start of the new year the Church immediately presents us with a human being who has what could only be considered as incalculable dignity. Who would have thought it possible that one of us could be the Mother of the great God, while of course being his creature? Yet so it is. However, Mary not only has this dignity, she possesses unique gifts of holiness which make her a truly worthy Mother of God — and a wonderful heavenly mother of us. God is all holy, and so is his Mother — he without limit, she within definite limits

as is necessary for a creature. Now, is there any key we can take up at the beginning of the year to help us understand *how* Mary lived out this all holy motherhood that was hers? This is important for we are her children, and we are called to imitate her.

St Luke gives us that key in today's Gospel passage (Luke 2: 16-21). "*As for Mary, she treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart.*" All that God had said and done was received into the mind and heart of Mary as the one immense treasure she lived with and for. All else derived its place and importance from what God said, did, and wanted. She *heard the word of God*, received it as the greatest of treasures, the one true pearl of great price, and *put it into practice perfectly* in her seemingly ordinary life. She is our mother in the ordinary life. Let us have as our aim this year to imitate Mary, the perfect disciple of her divine Son.



Feast of the Conversion of Saint Paul, Apostle

(January 25)

Entrance Antiphon 2 Tm 1:12; 4:8 I know the one in whom I have believed and I am sure that he, the just judge, the mighty, will keep safe what is my due until that day.

Collect O God, who taught the whole world through the preaching of the blessed Apostle Paul, draw us, we pray, nearer to you through the example of him whose conversion we celebrate today, and so make us witnesses to your truth in the world. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

The Conversion of St. Paul The conversion of Saul of Tarsus while he was on his way to Damascus is one of the most touching miracles in the history of the early Church. It shows us how faith comes from grace and from one's free cooperation. The doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ receives proof and a clear illustration when Christ

says, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” We should realize that the best way to hasten the unity of all Christians is to foster our own daily personal conversion.

Scripture today: Acts 22:3-16 or Acts 9:1-22;

Psalm 117:1bc, 2, Mark 16:15-18

Jesus said to them, Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well. (Mark 16:15-18)

Paul the missionary There are certain persons who have an axe to grind against the efforts of the Church of our day to engage with the modern world. They see profoundly ambiguous tendencies of a liberal nature in the decrees of the Second Vatican Council. Some such

persons claim that St John Henry Newman (canonized a saint in October 2019) was, in his Catholic period, the epitome of a beguiling and subtle liberalism in religion that made of him a father of what they perceive to be the modern Church's liberalism. The claim is ridiculous, but there is no doubt that Newman projected a very different image after his conversion to the Catholic faith than he had before it. I give this example of Newman merely as an illustrating introduction to another instance of great change in a person (though it was of a different order): that of St Paul. Compare the image of Saul of Tarsus prior to his conversion on the way to Damascus, as portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles and in certain passages of his own letters, with his image after it. So striking was this difference that it has entered into common language as synonymous with dramatic change. We refer to a "Damascus event" or a "Damascus change" as meaning a remarkable change of course in life, or a remarkable change in mind-set and attitude. It is, of course, one of the most famous conversions of all time. There is the change

in Buddha leading to his way of enlightenment, the change in Mahomet following on his belief that he had received a divine revelation, and there are others. That of St Paul is among them in terms of significance for the history of the world. There are some historians of early Christianity who have even gone to the strange excess of thinking that it was really Paul who founded what became Christianity. He it was, they opine, whose radical re-thinking of the Christian movement became the foundation of the Christianity that we know today. Jesus of Nazareth but started the “movement.” It was Paul who made of it the religion that it now is. That is a fantasy, but at least it bears witness to the power of his conversion and the immense change it wrought in him. Of course, this conversion was due to his meeting with the risen Christ and the grace given to him.

The change which was involved in this singular conversion was many-faceted, and at its heart was Paul’s alteration from being one who hated Jesus Christ as an enemy of the true religion to one who ardently loved him as the fulfilment of the true religion. Christ was discovered

to be the fullness of God's revelation, the image of the unseen God, and the One to whom the Scriptures bore witness. That much is plain. What prepared Paul to respond to the grace so dramatically given to him was that he had been a *man of conscience*. He had been striving to do what, according to his mistaken lights, he thought was the divine will. He had conscientiously believed that Christ was a usurper in religion, and that those following him were dangerous dupes who were undermining the religion revealed to their forefathers. It had to be rooted out tooth and nail. But once the divine will was revealed to him, with the aid of Christ's grace he changed accordingly. Now, intimately associated with this key element in the conversion of Paul that was the Person of Jesus, was another great change. Paul became the iconic Christian missionary. His life became that of one on mission. We might describe the life of Saul of Tarsus prior to his conversion as being an intense effort to preserve the revealed religion of the children of Israel. It was a conserving endeavour, especially in face of threats. He

hammered ruthlessly those who were spreading the new way. But once he became enamoured of Jesus Christ, the thrust of his life took a radically different direction. As Christ said of Saul in a vision to Ananias, *“he is a chosen vessel for me to bring my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel — and I will show him many things he must suffer for my name’s sake”* (Acts 9:15-16). Christ made of him an essentially missionary person. This, we might say, is especially the lesson of today’s feast, the Conversion of St Paul the Apostle. Christ wishes his disciples to be his friends and his ambassadors. This was a most notable difference between Judaism and Christianity when the new religion appeared. The disciple of Christ is called by him to be a missionary of his name, assisting in making disciples of all the nations.

It is the formal teaching of the Second Vatican Council that all the baptized are called by God to strive for personal holiness which consists in union with Jesus Christ. It also teaches that, precisely because of this union with Jesus Christ, begun at Baptism and nourished by the

other Sacraments and by personal endeavour, each disciple of Christ is called to a share in his mission. At his conversion, St Paul discovered Jesus Christ and his heart was won for him. Subsequently receiving the gift of the Spirit by the ministry of the Church, he gave his life to the propagation of the name of Jesus. He is a sign for all of us. Let us carry the banner in similar manner, each according to his circumstances and vocation, bearing witness to Jesus Christ in the world of our daily life.

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Second reflection:

Now I begin! The conversion of St Paul was one of the very great events of history. It was a turnabout in the mind and heart of a person that had enormous results on the life of that person and on the course of history. But what was its cause? Overwhelmingly, the cause of it was the power and the action of God. God brought it about by his grace, aided by Paul's prior sincerity. Now this has a lesson for us. To begin with, it shows us that it is of immense importance that we ourselves *convert*. Conversion must be part of our life, and our conversion has to be sincere. But if it is to be productive of true fruit (as was St Paul's conversion), it has to be the work of grace. So we ought pray for that grace, the grace of a change of heart. But there is this: the conversion of the life of the ordinary person is typically hidden, and very importantly, it is meant to be frequent, even daily. It is this daily conversion which we ought aspire to as a tremendous grace productive of marvellous fruit.

Let us begin again, ever beginning again. Let us aim every day to recognize our sins and repent of them, starting again and again to do the will of God in the ordinary duties of each day.

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Third reflection: (Acts 9:1-20)

St Paul's conversion Our passage from the Acts of the Apostles is one of the famous passages in world literature, narrating the conversion of St Paul. Christ intervened and made himself heard. Without Christ's intervention the change would not have occurred. But the fact that its effect was so immediate and profound indicates that something more was involved. Paul was an instance of the good soil that our Lord had spoken of in one of his parables, the soil which after it received the seed produced a hundredfold. Paul had been profoundly mistaken about the Person of Jesus, but it was not the blindness that comes

from refusing the light. Paul had been doing what he had thought was pleasing to God, even though in fact it was very displeasing. As we might say, Paul had meant well.

Once the true Light of his conscience came, Paul abandoned his course and became a disciple. Let us follow the light that is given us, and more light will be given. Obedience to the dictate of conscience must be the natural foundation of our religious life. This will be good soil for grace, the agent of holiness, to produce the harvest.



Feast of the Presentation of the Lord (February 2)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 48 (47):10-11 Your merciful love, O God, we have received in the midst of your temple. Your praise, O God, like your name, reaches the ends of the earth; your right hand is filled with saving justice.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, we humbly implore your majesty that, just as your Only Begotten Son was presented on this day in the Temple in the substance of our flesh, so, by your grace, we may be presented to you with minds made pure. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

(February 2) The Presentation This feast was first observed in the Eastern Church as “The Encounter.” In the sixth century it began to be observed in the West: in Rome with a more penitential character and in France with solemn blessings and processions of candles. It is popularly known as “Candlemas.” The Presentation of the

Lord formally concludes the celebration of the Nativity; with the offerings of the Virgin Mother and the prophecy of Simeon, the events now point toward Easter.

Scripture today: Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 24:7-10;

Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40 or 2:22-32

When the time of Mary's purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, they took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: a pair of doves or two young pigeons. Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms

and praised God, saying: Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel. (Luke 2: 22-32)

Obedience to God One of the very notable things in the public ministry of Jesus Christ was his conflict with many of the religious leaders — not all of them, but with, we might say, the leaders of the leaders, especially the Temple aristocracy. They were continually attacking our Lord for his disregard of what they insisted on as the requirements of the Law, and for his claims as to his own Person. It is clear from the ministry and the Passion and Death of our Lord that there was a spiritual corruption among many at the top of the nation's religious elite. Our Lord dealt severely with them, as did John the Baptist before him — John calling some of them a brood of vipers. Reading all this, the disciple of Christ may slip into thinking that the institutions of Jewish religion were worthy of scant regard, and that our Lord himself had scant

regard for them. But nothing could be further from the truth. Our Lord's condemnation of his enemies concerned their culpably benighted understanding and practice. He himself had the most profound reverence for the religion of Israel — for the simple reason that it embodied God's unique covenant with his chosen people. It was the religion which the one God — he and the Father and the Holy Spirit — had revealed to Abraham, the Patriarchs, the Prophets and to the chosen people. It embodied the will of God for his chosen people as he formed them to be bearers of the Blessing of all blessings to the nations. In the fullness of time the only-begotten Son became man to take this revealed religion to a new height in a new and final covenant. Our Lord loved the Law and the Prophets and the Temple because it manifested the will of his heavenly Father. As he said to his disciples, his food was to do the will of the One who sent him. Our Lord was a magnificent and incomparable Jew. He fulfilled with a superlative love all that the Jewish religion truly asked of the chosen people of God. He did all things well,

particularly all things pertaining to the observance of Revealed Religion. We see an allusion to this in the Gospel passage for today, which narrates the Presentation of our Lord in the Temple.

We read that *“when the time of Mary’s purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, they took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: a pair of doves or two young pigeons”* (Luke 2: 22-32). The presentation of Jesus Christ to the Lord God of Israel in the Temple was in obedience to the Law of the Lord. This is noted very explicitly by St Luke. Both the Child’s presentation and the offering of a sacrifice of doves or pigeons was in obedience to the Law of the Lord. It was one of the institutions of the religion of Israel, and at the outset of his life as man we find our Lord and his parents acting in obedience to it. It is an instance of a whole life of religious observance that characterized this most holy trio,

the Holy Family of Nazareth. We read that when our Lord returned to his native town in the midst of his prophetic ministry, he went into the Synagogue on the Sabbath, *as had been his custom*. We can imagine our Lord during those thirty years at Nazareth, duly observing all the feasts and Sabbaths, together with his mother and foster-father. We can imagine the three at home in their round of work, prayer, reading the scrolls of the Scriptures, at family relaxation, and leading — it scarcely need be said — exemplary lives as adherents of the Jewish religion. They obeyed God in everything, and our Gospel passage today gives us but one instance of this pattern. Mary and Joseph brought the Child to the Temple of Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, and to sacrifice — in keeping with the Law of the Lord. The will of God was everything to them. The will of his heavenly Father filled the soul of Jesus Christ from his earliest days. Luke goes on to tell us how at the age of twelve, the Child went with his parents to Jerusalem. We know the sequel. When they found him, he said to them, “*did you not know I must be about my*

Father's affairs?" The will of his Father was everything to him.

Not only was the Presentation of Jesus Christ in the Temple a manifestation of his (and their) obedience to the Law of God, but it was an act of formal commitment to it. The Child was being presented in the Temple. He was being offered to God for his service, as part of a long line of servants of Yahweh God. While they had dedicated themselves to a life of obedience to him, Jesus Christ, of course, surpassed them all in this obedience. Obedience to the will of his heavenly Father would take him through his years at Nazareth, through his public ministry, through his Passion and Death, to his Resurrection and Ascension at the right hand of his beloved Father. From there he pours out his divine Spirit whose mission is to empower each of us to follow in the footsteps of the Son, obedient unto death. Let us pursue this path, then!

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Second reflection: (Luke 2: 22-40)

The action of the Holy Spirit Let us consider in our mind's eye the persons gathered around the infant Messiah on the occasion of his presentation in the Temple. Let us consider Simeon. *“He was an upright and devout man; he looked forward to Israel’s comforting, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death until he had set eyes on the Christ of the Lord. Prompted by the Spirit, he came to the Temple.”* Notice how, in each of these three sentences describing Simeon, the action of the Holy Spirit is expressly mentioned. Simeon is a man whose life was guided by the Holy Spirit — like many other good and holy persons of the Old Testament. He was in this respect a forerunner of the New Dispensation, when the Holy Spirit would be poured out on *all* the baptized. Just as the Holy Spirit led him to long for the Messiah, and indeed guided him into the presence of the Messiah, so the Holy Spirit is given to the many now in order to guide them in their union with the Messiah. Then there is Anna, the

prophetess. She too, though the action of the Holy Spirit in her life is not explicitly cited in the passage, is profoundly under the Holy Spirit's influence. She too *"came by just at that moment and began to praise God; and she spoke of the child to all who looked forward to the deliverance of Jerusalem."* The Holy Spirit made of her a true temple for himself, made her holy, and led her to the Messiah. She in turn, led by the Holy Spirit, spoke of the Messiah to others. Then there are Mary and Joseph, outstripping both Simeon and Anna as instruments and temples of the Holy Spirit, especially the all-holy Virgin Mary.

The entire scene reminds us that the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us, gathers us all around the Person of Jesus, and leads us to bring others to Jesus. Let us constantly pray to the Holy Spirit for light and strength that we be worthy disciples of the Master.



The Chair of St Peter (February 22)

Entrance Antiphon Lk 22: 32 The Lord says to Simon Peter: I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail, and, once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that no tempests may disturb us, for you have set us fast on the rock of the Apostle Peter's confession of faith. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

THE CHAIR OF SAINT PETER, APOSTLE This feast brings to mind the mission of teacher and pastor conferred by Christ on Peter, and continued in an unbroken line down to the present Pope. We celebrate the unity of the Church, founded upon the Apostle, and renew our assent to the magisterium of the Roman Pontiff, extended both to truths which are solemnly defined "ex cathedra" and to all the acts of the ordinary magisterium.

Scripture today: 1 Peter 5:1-4; Psalm 23:1-6; Matthew 16:13-19

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, Who do people say the Son of Man is? They replied, Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. But what about you? he asked. Who do you say I am? Simon Peter answered, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus replied, Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 16:13-19)

Christ and his Church There are instances in the Old Testament of prophets whose mission was challenged and who had therefore to insist on their having

been called by God to serve him in the prophetic office. Elijah makes his appearance in the book of Kings (1 Kings 17) and at a certain point claims to be the only prophet of the Lord (1 Kings 18:22). He summons the prophets of Baal to a contest between the Lord and Baal — whichever accepts the sacrifice would be counted by the people as God. We know the famous sequel. The fire of God consumed the sacrifice prepared by Elijah, and the prophets of Baal were subsequently executed. It was a vindication not only of Elijah's claim to be a prophet of the Lord, but of the Lord's claim to be the one and only God of Israel. Elisha was accepted as a prophet of the Lord (2 Kings 2: 15) by the guild prophets in Jericho. Many claimed to be prophets in the history of Israel, and an important theme in the nation's history is the discernment of those who were true prophets and those who were false (1 Kings 22:22). In the Scriptures there are several recorded clashes between the two. When John the Baptist was well into his ministry, the chief priests in Jerusalem sent their representatives to ask him officially if he were

Elijah, or the Prophet, or the Christ? John the Baptist said he was none of these — although our Lord later told his three principal disciples privately that in fact John was the Elijah who was to come again. John had been fulfilling the mission of the returned Elijah. At the end, our Lord's own claims were formally rejected by the nation's religious leaders. He was, instead, counted a blasphemer worthy of death. So the question of identity was critical, and our Gospel today (Matthew 16:13-19) reports a pivotal scene, in which our Lord asks his own disciples who the people considered him to be. It is agreed, they said, that you are a prophet. *But you*, he asked — *who do you say I am?* Simon Peter's answer was magnificent and it set Christ above and beyond all who had preceded him. *You are* the promised One: *the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*

Who do you say I am? The question was pivotal. Our Lord makes it clear that it was a great blessing for Simon to have had the right answer to this. The answer to Christ's question is possessed not by “the people” but by Simon and those who are with him. Simon has been given this answer

not “*by man, but by my Father in heaven.*” Then there comes an unprecedented act. Christ designates Simon as the Rock of the Church which he, Christ, will build: “*You are Peter (the Rock), and on this Rock I will build my Church.*” Set this against the backdrop of the kings, priests and prophets of the Old Testament — there is no direct parallel. No prophet, up to and including John, had done or said such a thing. Christ’s preaching had been a proclamation of the arrival of the kingdom of God. He had preached incessantly about its requirements and its blessings, and by his miracles had shown the power that it would carry. Though he was discrete about his own place in the Kingdom, it was clear to his disciples that he himself was the Messiah-King. But to this point, there is a certain vagueness about the Kingdom. Where was it, and how did one become its citizen? In what sense was it to be “a Kingdom” — for such a term sounded very political. In our scene today, the keys to the kingdom of Heaven are placed in the hands of a particular man who heads a particular body. That man is Simon, constituted by Christ

to be the Rock of the “Church.” The kingdom of God will abide in this Church which Christ will build, and Simon is given the keys to its entry. There is, then, a new “nation,” a new “people,” a new “kingdom” coming into being — a new empire. This is Christ’s Church. It is in fact, David’s kingdom brought to a new level, and it would never end. Christ will be its Lord and King, but Simon will be its principal executive officer, as it were. On him, in a visible sense, will the Church be built, and nothing, not even the powers of Hell, will be able to overcome it. The kingdom will be very concrete and visible, and to it will be granted the victory.

Many things can be missed that are plainly stated in Scripture. Scripture plainly states that Jesus Christ gives us his flesh to eat and his blood to drink. This is denied by many Christians, and they deny it in good faith and with great sincerity. But they are seriously mistaken. There are those who deny that Christ established a definite Church — one definite Church and no other. They sincerely think that any group of persons who gather in Jesus’ name and

profess to follow his teaching are thereby constituted his Church. But this is plainly not according to Christ's words, and in any case, where is Peter in such a system, Peter to whom were given the keys? Where is the formal designation by Christ? Let us ponder long and joyfully on our Gospel text today, so illuminating, so concrete, so essential.

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Second reflection:

Prepare yourself for an ordeal

Years ago I watched on television an hour long documentary on the life of the great Mongolian conqueror, Genghis Khan. As with many conquerors in history, his life was marked by the loss of countless lives. There is one aspect of this that should be noted. It is that so many lives in human history have come and gone without their knowing the true purpose of their existence! We are

blessed to know the true purpose of our lives. It is to know, love and serve the true God. This is the goal that God has revealed for us and which we ought set ourselves to attain, and it is the goal which we ought open up for others. But there is a fundamental aspect of this goal which we are prone to overlook, and which we are prone to conceal from others. It is what the first reading from the Old Testament Book of Sirach plainly *reminds us of*: “*My son, if you aspire to serve the Lord, prepare yourself for an ordeal*” (Sirach 2:1).

Let us gaze on the figure of our Lord, and how he fulfilled the teaching of the Scriptures in this, as in everything.



Feast of St Patrick (Australia, Ireland, New Zealand)

(March 17)

Collect O God, who chose the Bishop Saint Patrick to preach your glory to the peoples of Ireland, grant, through his merits and intercession, that those who glory in the name of Christian may never cease to proclaim your wondrous deeds to all. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

St Patrick (389-461) Born in Great Britain, it may have been Pope St. Celestine I who sent Patrick to preach the faith in Ireland. In thirty years, he succeeded in converting the whole country after heartbreaking difficulties

Scripture today: Jeremiah 1:4-9; Acts 13:46-49;

Luke 10:1-12

After this the Lord appointed seventy two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. He told them, The harvest is

plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road. When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.' If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; if not, it will return to you. Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house. When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is set before you. Heal the sick who are there and tell them, 'The kingdom of God is near you.' But when you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that sticks to our feet we wipe off against you. Yet be sure of this: The kingdom of God is near.' I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town. (Luke 10:1-12)

The Christian vocation We read in the Acts of the Apostles that following the stoning of Stephen a great persecution broke out against the Church of Jerusalem.

The faithful were “*all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the Apostles*” (8:1). Saul was prominent in this search and destroy mission, and he attempted to put an end to the Church. But the result of this was the spread and flourishing of the Church. We read that “*Therefore, those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word*” (8:4). Among them was Philip who then preached with success to the Samaritans. So the persecution resulted in the spread of the Church to Samaria. We then read of Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian official who was reading the prophet Isaiah. Their meeting resulted in the Ethiopian’s baptism. While Saul was pursuing the disciples, the Church was spreading correspondingly. But then Saul himself was converted! My point here is that difficulty, persecution and reversals — which is to say a share in the cross of Christ — are a rich environment for the flourishing of the Church’s work in bringing Christ to the world. We read in the Gospels that Christ warned his disciples of difficulties and persecutions — and, he said, this will be a special

opportunity to bear witness to him (Luke 21: 13). Let our minds pass over the centuries to what was perhaps the greatest reversal in the history of the Church. I refer to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century during which whole countries passed out of their long allegiance to the Catholic Church. In turn, these departures led to further subdivisions of Christian faithful. But notice this. At the very time of the Protestant Reformation there was a great burst of missionary outreach by the Catholic Church. For instance, following its earlier discovery, the South American continent was evangelized and became Catholic. Mysteriously, times of suffering and persecution can be times of very great fruit. Let our minds go back to the fifth century, a time of great Christian dissension in the East, and of barbarian invasions in the West. This was the time of St Patrick's spiritual conquest of Ireland. In a far-flung corner of the known world, Patrick was adding to the Church a great tree of new and promising life.

These thoughts ought lead us to a renewed appreciation of the essentially missionary character of our

Christian vocation. The persecution of the Church at Jerusalem led to the expansion of the Church beyond the Jewish people to the pagan world, and ultimately to Rome itself. The persecution of the Church resulted in its ultimate conquest of Rome, which became Christian. The reversals of the sixteenth century led to the expansion of the Church into an entirely new continent. It was as if the Church's missionary character, when blocked from one direction, was irrepressible. Indeed, it is irrepressible especially when the shadow of the Cross overhangs, for the Holy Spirit is continually moving the sons and daughters of the Church to go out into the byways and invite all to the wedding. It happened in the fifth century with St Patrick and his evangelization of Ireland. During the so-called Dark Ages, the Church gradually evangelized the barbarian invaders and built Christian Europe. We too, individually, are called to be apostolic, and by our daily life to be part of the missionary endeavour of Christ's disciples. Let us also notice this. The prophet Isaiah had his disciples (Isaiah 8: 16). We are not told that they entered into his own mission

in bringing the word of the Lord to the people. They simply learnt that word from him, and strove to understand it under his instruction. But consider the life to which our Lord introduced his disciples. Christ selected the Twelve, and thereupon put them out on mission, to prepare the way before him. *“... the Lord appointed seventy two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. He told them, The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves.”* They were to go to “every place” where he himself was to visit, and they were to pray to the Lord of the harvest for more workers. Each member of the Church must hear Christ’s call to go! When Ignatius of Loyola was studying at the University of Paris he was coached by Francis Xavier. He repeated to Xavier the words of the Gospel (Mark 8: 36): *What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his life?* Those words converted Xavier, who became one of the greatest of missionaries.

In *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola* we are asked to put to ourselves the following questions: What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What shall I do for him? Just before Christ ascended into heaven he gave his disciples an astonishing charge. They were to *go to the whole world and make disciples of all the nations*, teaching all that he had commanded. Our lives are to find their place in this commission. We have a powerful example in St Patrick, a man who had such a signal impact on early Ireland, and through it during the following centuries on so much of the Church.

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Second reflection:

Ask and it will be given to you “*Ask and it will be given to you.... Your heavenly Father will give good things to those who ask him.*” (Matthew 7:7-12). The greatest gift we can ask for is the gift of personal holiness, together with the gifts that enable us to seek holiness prudently and correctly. The fact is, of course, that it is one thing to

aspire to personal holiness, and it is another thing to take the necessary means to attain it. One can be mistaken as to the means, and quite possibly when one looks back over the years, all one can see are failures and mistakes which bring embarrassment. What is one to do in the face of this personal experience of failure in attaining the most important goal of life? To begin with, one should acknowledge one's failures and incapacity before God, and the necessity of his grace. However, the thought of past and present failure ought not be allowed to discourage. Rather it should lead to a renewal of the desire for this goal of holiness, while entrusting oneself more totally to the love, the mercy, the power and the guidance of God.

It is he and he alone who can bring this great work to its fruition. *"Ask, and it will be given to you."* So, now I begin! I ask for holiness and the grace to take the means to attain it.



Solemnity of St Joseph, the husband of Mary (March 19)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Lk 12: 42 Behold, a faithful and prudent steward, whom the Lord set over his household.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that by Saint Joseph's intercession your Church may constantly watch over the unfolding of the mysteries of human salvation, whose beginnings you entrusted to his faithful care. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

(March 19) St. Joseph is considered the second greatest saint, next to the Blessed Virgin Mary, because of his humility and the closeness he had to Jesus as his foster father. Scripture tells us that Joseph was just, pure, gentle, prudent, and unfailingly obedient to the divine will. We wish to imitate him by renewing our desire to be faithful. We know that the only meaning of our life is to be faithful

to the Lord till the last day, as Joseph was. Bl. Pius IX named him Patron of the Universal Church, and Bl. John XXIII included his name in the Roman Canon.

Scripture today: 2 Samuel 7:4-5a, 12-14a, 16;

Psalm 89:2-5, 27 and 29; Romans 4:13, 16-18, 22;

Matthew 1:16, 18-21, 24a or Luke 2:41-51a

Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Of her was born Jesus who is called the Christ. Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly. Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from

their sins.” When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home.
(Matthew 1:16, 18-21, 24a)

St Joseph Today we think of a beautiful saint, Joseph the foster-father of our Lord, Joseph the husband of Mary the mother of Jesus and our mother. Some saints have left many volumes of writings and letters which tell us about their activities and their inner life. St John Henry Newman, one of the greatest writers of English prose, and one of the greatest religious minds of his century, left over forty volumes of books and over thirty volumes of his correspondence. A great deal, then, is known about Newman. St Joseph left us nothing in writing of course, and we are told very little about him in the Gospels. Were it not for Matthew and Luke including a very important infancy component in their Gospels, and having Joseph feature in it, St Joseph would have been at most a mere name. St Joseph led a very ordinary life. He did not stand out in any unusual way. He was not, say, a synagogue president nor some sort of town or village leader. He did

nothing that brought him to the attention of a wider part of Galilee. When our Lord began his public ministry, his fame spread far and wide in Galilee and in Judea and even beyond. This was not so with St Joseph. He was a humble carpenter who had the care of a wife and foster-child. Joseph lived an ordinary life like that of the rest of his unknown townsmen and countless others in every time and place. But in the sight of God that ordinary life which Joseph lived was full of grandeur. We know this firstly from traces given to us in the Gospels, but especially from the understanding possessed by the Church. The Church's insight into what is revealed is not restricted to the barest statement of a few Scripture texts. Under the guiding impulse of the Spirit of God, the Church progressively sees more and more of what must have been the case, granted what God has revealed. The Church's mind on the person of St Joseph is manifest in her liturgy, in the writings of the saints and theologians especially (but not only) of the last thousand years, and notably in papal teaching of the past two centuries. Her mind is that Joseph, the foster-father of

our Lord, was a person of immense holiness, and after Mary his wife, he is of all the saints the closest to our Lord.

Many theological reasons can be offered to explain this conviction of the Church. God confers grace proportioned to the office for which that person is selected — as was the case with our Lady herself. Further, to the degree that something approaches its source, so it receives the effects of that source. Now, with the exception of our Lady, no one approached Christ the source of grace more closely than did St Joseph. Joseph's intimacy with Jesus, apart from our Lady's own intimacy with him, was never equalled, and never will be. Imagine the intimacy between Jesus and Joseph, for Joseph was his foster-father and daily associate! Imagine the intimacy with our Lady that Joseph had, for he was her husband. These are the simple facts. But is there a further key to understanding Joseph's sanctity and how he reached it? As I have said, there was nothing very unusual about his life as it appeared on the public scene, nor about the life of Mary either. During all those years in Nazareth, there is no record in the Gospels of

the people there having any inkling that the three holiest people of all time, holier than the angels and saints, dwelt humbly and quietly among them. They had not the slightest notion that Jesus was God himself. What distinguished Joseph was not, as I have said, exceptional deeds done for God. There are many saints who have done extraordinary things. Consider the work of Thomas Aquinas, brilliant, extensive, altogether ground breaking in both philosophy and theology. I mentioned Cardinal Newman earlier — he made exceptional breakthroughs in, for instance, the relationship between faith and reason. These saints stood out not only for their holiness, but also for their extraordinary achievements. We could recall extraordinary missionaries, extraordinary mystics and other agents of change. There were founders of great institutes and movements for holiness and apostolate. Their achievements were out of the ordinary. But St Joseph's life was not like that. His deeds did not stand out beyond the ordinary. His life was made up of ordinary activities, as was the life of Mary his wife, the mother of Jesus.

The secret of St Joseph's holiness was the degree of loving union with Jesus with which he did everything. His love for Jesus and Mary was directed purely to God and his glory. He did his ordinary duties with an extraordinary love for God our Father, for Jesus and for Mary. Inasmuch as he was preparing and protecting our Lord for the mission of saving mankind from sin (for the angel had told him that Jesus would save his people from their sins), he fulfilled his duties out of a great love for mankind too. He was led by the Holy Spirit to fulfil all his responsibilities towards Jesus and Mary with an extraordinary love and devotion. This is a powerful lesson for all other disciples and lovers of Jesus who are called to live very ordinary lives. It means that every life can be a life full of hidden and humble grandeur. No matter what be our calling, we can aspire to be very pleasing to God. Go to Joseph, then! He is our model!

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Second reflection:

Joseph our Protector Just as St Joseph was the guardian and protector of Jesus and Mary, so the Church has declared St Joseph to be the guardian and protector of the Church and of all the Church's members. St Teresa of Avila called him her father and lord, and St Josemaria Escriva in like manner called him this too. He is our protector, above all by his intercession: *St Joseph, pray for us!* Saint Mary MacKillop used to say, *Go to Joseph!* He intercedes for us as our heavenly protector, the guardian of the universal Church. While we are Mary's children, he is her husband. How our Lord must look to Joseph still, as he must to Mary his mother as well, for he surely continues to be the perfect son he was. As Mary's prayers to her Son on our behalf are irresistible, so would be the prayers of Joseph. He is our intercessor and heavenly protector. Let us go to Joseph. Mary and Joseph were the first and greatest of Christians. Let us strive to be like them.



Feast of the Annunciation of the Lord (March 25)

Entrance Antiphon Heb. 10:5, 7 The Lord said, as he entered the world: Behold, I come to do your will, O God.

Collect O God, who willed that your Word should take on the reality of human flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary, grant, we pray, that we, who confess our Redeemer to be God and man, may merit to become partakers even in his divine nature. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

(March 25) The Annunciation of the Lord The Annunciation was the moment when Gabriel the Archangel told Mary she would be the Mother of the Son of God. Mary gave her “Fiat” (Be it done), at which she conceived the Saviour by the power of the Holy Spirit. Christians can always find meaning in this dialogue in which our Lady appears to us so humble yet so great. Through her consent to God’s plans, she took part in the redemptive work of her Son, Jesus. She is the Mother of Christ and our Mother.

Scripture today: Isaiah 7:10-14, 8:10; Psalm 39;

Hebrews 10:4-10; Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, Hail, you who are full of grace! The Lord is with you. Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end. How will this be, Mary asked the angel, since I am a virgin? The angel answered, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old

age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God. I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered. May it be to me as you have said. Then the angel left her. (Luke 1:26-38)

The Annunciation The Angel's greeting to Mary is an unusual one. It is well known that a normal Hebrew method of greeting and even of farewell was to wish a person "peace." For instance, when our Lord appeared to his disciples after rising from the dead, he began by saying, "*Peace be with you*". Then he showed them his hands and his side. With that, he repeated the greeting: "*Peace be with you*" (John 20:19-23). However, we notice that there was one occasion when our Lord used the same expression as did the Angel when greeting Mary. It was when, in the Gospel of St Matthew, our Lord met the women as they were hurrying from the tomb to tell the disciples that he had risen. He said to them, Hail! (*Chairete — Rejoice!*). There was every reason to do so, for he had risen from the dead, his messianic work now completed. The Angel greets Mary in the same fashion: Hail! (*Chaire —*

Rejoice!). It is agreed that Mary was steeped in the prophets, and the most obvious allusion that this word conjures up in the mind is the exhortation of the prophet Zephaniah to the daughter of Zion: “*Rejoice, O daughter of Zion!*” (Zephaniah 3:14). The prophet was addressing Jerusalem, and Mary is the daughter of Zion *par excellence*. The prophet assures Jerusalem that “The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst” — and some understand “midst” to be literally “womb.” Mary, so highly favoured, will receive in her womb the Saviour. The Angel assures Mary that the Lord is with her. The prophet directs Zion not to fear: *Fear not, O Zion*. The Angel tells Mary not to fear. The prophet tells Jerusalem that the Lord is in her midst as a mighty Saviour. The Angel tells Mary that she is to call the child’s name Jesus, which of course means “God saves.” As a matter of fact, this very word is used again by another prophet and in a particularly messianic fashion. The prophet Zechariah promises the “daughter Zion” (Jerusalem) that their king is coming to them as a Saviour. So they are to rejoice:

“Rejoice heartily, O daughter Zion... See your king shall come to you, a true saviour, meek and riding on an ass...” (Zechariah 9: 9). St John sees Christ’s entry into Jerusalem as fulfilling this prophecy: he is the saviour who comes to Jerusalem riding on an ass (John 12: 12-16). The overall point here, though, is that the greeting used by the Angel to Mary (*Chaire*) evoked thoughts of *God coming to save*, with a messianic connotation.

The acknowledgment by the Angel that the Lord was with her not only was praise for her immersion in God. It also alluded to a coming mission. *“Rejoice!”* he said to her, *“The Lord is with you!”* We read in the Book of Judges that the Angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon with the very words used by the Angel when addressing Mary: *“The Lord is with you, O champion!”* Gideon is then entrusted with the mission of saving Israel from the power of Midian — and he has the strength of the Lord to enable him. *“I shall be with you,”* the Lord assures him (Judges 6: 11-16). These opening words of the Angel to Mary are no mere conventional greeting. They introduce a momentous

message. Nor is the title accorded her by the Angel simply a reference to her personal holiness, though it is certainly that as well. The context is messianic. She is the favoured one — a phrase that points to the Source of this favour. This “favour” not only refers to her fullness of grace, but her messianic motherhood, which in fact will be a divine motherhood. The Lord is with her to assure her of the accomplishment of the divine plan, just as the Lord had been with Gideon to assure him of the fulfilment of his mission. She who is so highly favoured — and I am not aware of any other figure in all of the Scriptures addressed by a heavenly messenger in this way — is now enlightened as to her mission. The Angel’s message then makes it clear that Mary is to be mother of the Messiah, mother of him who is great and possessing the throne of David. He will rule over Jacob’s house forever. All of this is to happen in a divinely-intended way. The Messiah will be Son of the Most High in a unique sense, and it will all be the work of the Holy Spirit. Thus will the holy child be the Son of God. There is nothing like it in all the Scriptures,

and it stands out as a most singular work of God. The bell now tolls, and the countdown of salvation has formally begun.

Let us contemplate the Archangel as he stands deferentially before the humble maid. He is overflowing with admiration for her. There she stands before him, she who is about to become the mother of his Lord and God. She is to be the Queen-mother, all-powerful in her intercession, just as she is unsurpassed in the divine favour which has been bestowed on her. It is a favour which is about to begin a new stage. *Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death!*

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Second Reflection (Luke 1:26-38)

The gift of the Holy Spirit All recognise that St John Paul II was a great Christian and a great Pope, raised to the honours of the altar soon after his death. What was the source of his ardent Christian life? Was it simply his

many natural qualities and gifts, or was it something above and beyond this that led him to love God so much? The source of his Christian and spiritual life was, of course, the action of the Holy Spirit who had come to him at his baptism, at his confirmation, and at his ordination as priest and bishop. The Christian life is the fruit of the activity of the Holy Spirit within us, provided we give to Him our full cooperation. The Scripture readings of today's feast refer to the coming and action of the Holy Spirit in the life of Mary our Mother, and indirectly in the life of the Church and in us.

Let each of us resolve to live to the full our life in Christ, begun at our baptism. This we can do if we work at it wholeheartedly, because each of us have received the gift of the Holy Spirit, Christ's gift to the Church's members. We also have the aid of the Virgin Mary our Mother, filled as she is with the action of the Holy Spirit. Let us then live for God, and bring God to others.



St Mark the Evangelist (April 25)

Entrance Antiphon Mk 16:15 Go into all the world, and proclaim the Gospel to every creature, alleluia.

Collect O God, who raised up Saint Mark, your Evangelist, and endowed him with the grace to preach the Gospel, grant, we pray, that we may so profit from his teaching as to follow faithfully in the footsteps of Christ. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

St Mark He was the son of a woman called Mary in whose house Peter sought refuge after being freed from jail. He aided St. Paul and his own cousin St. Barnabas in the evangelization of Cyprus. Later, Mark became the companion and secretary of St. Peter in Rome. He wrote the second Gospel, which, among other things, emphasizes the miraculous power of the Saviour.

Scripture today: 1 Peter 5:5b-14; Psalm 89:2-3, 6-7, 16-17;

Mark 16:15-20

Jesus said to the Eleven, Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well. After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it. (Mark 16:15 20)

He is for all One of the striking things about early and classical Judaism is its *universalism*. By that I mean that it was a religion with a universal mission. As a religion, it did not regard itself as simply a function or expression of its own nation alone. The whole world was destined to turn to their God and be blessed as a result.

Jesus Christ himself says so in his dialogue with the woman of Samaria by Jacob's Well: "*You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews*" (John 4:22). Plainly, our Lord's meaning is that the salvation of *the world* is from the Jews. That was the mission of Judaism. This is a stupendous claim and conviction, and utterly unexpected. What backwater people would ever presume to have such an idea of itself, an idea that endured despite catastrophic reversals, and with no signs of material power to make it possible? There were surprising things about the religion, not unrelated to this. To begin with, the Hebrews knew — at least by the time they finally understood their religion — that theirs was the *one and only God*. Their God was the only one, he made everything, and he was the master of everything. Now this was close to unique, and was scarcely to be expected of a small and struggling people harassed and vulnerable to their neighbours great and small. The greatest of the peoples assumed a variety of gods high and low — but not the Hebrews. It would have seemed

ridiculous to the mass of the Greeks and Romans to have posited but one god, even though the occasional philosopher came up with more or less the idea. Aristotle proposed a First Cause, the desire for which moved all things. But that was just a theory, and certainly not a religion held by a people. For its brief period there was the monotheism imposed by the Egyptian Pharaoh Akhenaten (Amenhotep IV, 1364-1347 B.C.). According to his cult, the god Ra created himself from a primeval mound in the shape of a pyramid and then created all other gods. But the economic collapse at the end of Akhenaten's reign spelt the end of this religious episode. The next Pharaoh, Tutankhamen, appeased the offended gods whose resentment had blighted human enterprise. The high monotheism of the Hebrews, which was always stressed and which was ever increasing in religious purity, was a remarkable phenomenon of the ancient world. Now, this included its *universalism*.

The one God of the Hebrews was, the Hebrews knew, the one Lord of all. Importantly, all the world would be

blessed in the fact. Salvation for all was from the Jews. There was the ancient Fall of man, but there was also the ancient promise pronounced over the Serpent: “*I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall crush your head and you shall bruise his heel*” (Genesis 3:15). What did it mean? That indeed was the question and there were all kinds of interpretations, many of which envisioned the political and economic prosperity of the Hebrews. There was no doubting the prophecy. What was in doubt was its interpretation, and it was in Jesus Christ that God delivered the divine interpretation. But plainly the original promise was of a universal character. There would be victory over the Serpent and this would touch all mankind. The matter became more specific with the call of Abraham: “*I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ... by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves*” (Genesis 12:3). The whole world would receive a blessing through Abraham. So the Serpent’s head would be crushed through Abraham and his posterity —

but the Serpent would bruise the heel. And so the grand hope grew. The one God had chosen his people, and through them all the world would be blessed and saved. As the prophet in the school of Isaiah put it, “*all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the Lord*” (Isaiah 66:23). But now, how was all this to be done? It would be done by the coming Messiah. His would be the universal mission and in him salvation would come to the earth from the Jews. But no-one of worth had ever claimed to be this person, let alone did any manifest the credentials for the task. Samuel did not, nor did David or Solomon, nor did Elijah, nor Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezechiel, nor anyone right up to John the Baptist. John made it very plain: *I am not the Christ*. But ah! There was one. John pointed him out, and he, the one thus pointed to, claimed the divine role: *I am he!* (John 4:26). He was recognized as such: the Samaritans he visited declared him to be “*indeed the Saviour of the world*” (John 4:44). More than this, he was the one Lord and God (John 20:28). Intimately part of this

grand truth, it was he who fulfilled the universal character of the promise.

All of this brings us to our Gospel passage today (Mark 16:15-20). The risen Jesus sets his bedraggled yet renewed disciples a gigantic task, one never before set forth in Judaism's varied history. They were to make the whole world his disciples. Therein would the universal character of Judaism's divine mission be fulfilled. The Blessing for "*all the families of the earth*" is Jesus Christ, and he is for those who choose to be his disciples. Therein lies salvation for all – to be his disciples. *This is the will of God*, St Paul would write, *your sanctification* — and it would come by being a disciple of the risen Jesus. He who believes will be saved. By this would salvation come from the Jews, and it would be salvation for the whole world, "*for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved*" (Acts 4:12).



Feast of Saints Philip and James, Apostles (May 3)

Entrance Antiphon These are the holy men whom the Lord chose in his own perfect love; to them he gave eternal glory, alleluia.

Collect O God, who gladden us each year with the feast day of the Apostles Philip and James, grant us, through their prayers, a share in the Passion and Resurrection of your Only Begotten Son, so that we may merit to behold you for eternity. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

(May 3) Saints Philip and James Like Peter and Andrew, St. Philip was from Bethsaida, in Galilee. According to the tradition, he was crucified at Hierapolis in Phrygia where he had preached the Gospel. He introduced St. Bartholomew (also known as Nathanael) to Christ. Christ declared to Philip, “Whoever has seen me has seen the

Father ... I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (Jn 14:8, 11).

St. James of our Feast today is often called James the Less, because of Mark’s reference to him as “the younger James” (Mk 15:40). As Bishop of Jerusalem, he wrote one of the epistles of the New Testament. St. James was thrown down from the terrace of the Temple and then stoned to death. The names of Sts. Philip and James are mentioned in the Roman Canon.

Scripture today: 1 Corinthians 15:1-8; Psalm 18;
John 14: 6-14.

Jesus said, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him. Philip said, Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us. Jesus answered: Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the

Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves. I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.
(John 14:6-14)

Philip and James In the Gospel of St Matthew we have a list of the Twelve Apostles. There is James the son of Zebedee whose brother was John, and there is James the son of Alphaeus. Philip also is one of the Twelve (Matthew 10: 2-4). Similarly, in the Gospel of St Mark, James the son of Zebedee and James the son of Alphaeus are given, together with Philip. In Luke, there are two with the name James, the second one being James the son of

Alphaeus, and Philip. It looks as if care is taken in each of the synoptics not to confuse the two James, and they do this by giving the name of the father of each. The first *Catholic Encyclopedia* is of the opinion that there is “very good ground (Galatians 1:19, 2:9, 2:12) for believing that the Apostle James, the son of Alphaeus is the same person as James, the brother (that is, relative) of the Lord, the well-known Bishop of Jerusalem of the Acts.” The Gospel of St John gives us some details about Philip. Very impressive is the first mention of Philip in the Gospel of St John. We get the impression that the inspired author remembers the details well. He, John, together with Andrew, has just stayed with Jesus and has come to know him as the Messiah, the one about whom the prophets wrote. Andrew went to bring his brother Simon to Jesus, and Simon is told by Jesus that he would be called “Rock.” We are told that the day after this Jesus “finds Philip,” and invites him to “follow me.” It is as if our Lord had been *looking for* him. No-one brought Philip to Jesus, Jesus *found* him. Had Jesus known Philip before the formal call?

We do not know, but Philip's response was excellent, for he then finds Nathanael and bears witness to the identity of Jesus: "*We have found him of whom Moses spoke in the law, and the prophets, Jesus, the son of Joseph, of Nazareth.*" This was a momentous discovery for each of these initial disciples, and in a measure their own excellent moral dispositions assisted in their new realization of it. I think the first thing we ought think of about Philip is that he was one of Christ's first disciples, and must have had excellent dispositions.

Apart from being listed among the Twelve, Philip is mentioned by St John before the miraculous feeding of the multitude. Christ turns towards Philip with the question: "*Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat?*" to which the Philip answers: "*Two hundred penny worth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one may take a little*" (6: 5 7). He is a practical man, and perhaps with gifts for organizing. John tells us, though, why Christ put his question to Philip: "*He said this to test him, for he knew what he was about to do.*" By "testing" John may mean to

provide Philip with a further opportunity for his faith to grow. John mentions Philip again not long before the Passion. When some “Greeks” in Jerusalem came to Philip and expressed their desire to see Jesus, Philip reported the fact to Andrew and then both brought the news to Jesus (12: 21 23). In both incidents we are reminded of the distinguishing feature of the Apostle Philip — he had given, and would give, his life to the love and service of Jesus Christ. This is the first great thing we ought learn from Philip, and emulate. But clearly, Philip had more, much more to learn about his beloved Master — and this too we ought remember in thinking of ourselves. We always have much to learn yet about Jesus Christ. In our Gospel passage today (John 14: 6 14), our Lord makes wondrous statements about himself. *“Jesus said, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him”* No-one can come to the Father except through Jesus Christ. To see and know Jesus is to know

and see the Father. No prophet had said such things. No founder of a religion, such as Mahomet, claimed such prerogatives. But at this stage Philip couldn't get it, and — candid with his beloved Master as ever — he pressed for an explanation. “*Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.*” Our Lord's reply is gratefully recorded by John, throwing further light on the mystery of the holy Trinity. “*Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father,*” and “*I am in the Father and the Father is in me.*”

Let us contemplate the figures of these two Apostles, who loved Jesus Christ and lived the rest of their lives in an unstinting service of him. They bore witness to the truth of his person, Son of God and Son of Man, predicted Messiah for the world, Redeemer of the world from its sins. He is the way to the Father, and he is the revelation of the Father to man. Let us pray for the grace to love Jesus Christ as they did, not sparing the cost, but giving their all to him.



Feast of Saint Matthias, Apostle (May 14)

Entrance Antiphon Jn 15:16 It was not you who chose me, says the Lord, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.

Collect O God, who assigned Saint Matthias a place in the college of Apostles, grant us, through his intercession, that, rejoicing at how your love has been allotted to us, we may merit to be numbered among the elect. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever

(May 14) St Matthias: According to Acts 1:15-26, during the days after the Ascension, Peter stood up in the midst of the brothers (about 120 of Jesus' followers). Now that Judas had betrayed his ministry, it was necessary, Peter said, to fulfil the scriptural recommendation: "*May another take his office.*" "*Therefore, it is necessary that one of the men who accompanied us the whole time the Lord Jesus came and went among us, beginning from the baptism of*

John until the day on which he was taken up from us, become with us a witness to his resurrection” (Acts 1:21 22). They nominated two men: Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias. They prayed and drew lots. The choice fell upon Matthias, who was added to the Eleven. Matthias is not mentioned by name anywhere else in the New Testament. It is said that he worked for the faith in Palestine, and was later was stoned to death. Today we are reminded that our Christian vocation is a gratuitous gift from God which we should accept and live out with gratitude and fidelity.

Scripture today: Acts 1:15-17.20-26; Psalm 112;

John 15:9-17

Jesus said to his disciples, As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love

each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit- fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other. (John 15: 9-17)

The love of God If we are to make sense of life, we have to start somewhere. Do we start with an axiom, a proposition, a wish, or rather with facts of experience? Some philosophers choose to begin with axioms, propositions, or proposals, which, as they regard it, are self-evident, and they construct their system on that basis. Another starting point is to begin with objective facts. I would suggest that there are two great spheres of *fact* — there are *things* that are, and then there is *moral law*. That is to say, there is the “is” and there is the “ought.” I am

using the term “fact” broadly — in the sense that we might say that it is a “fact” that you must not steal or murder. The “ought” is as much an experiential fact as the concrete unit. That is, the moral law commanding respect for the life of another is *just as real* as the chair on which I am sitting. If the chair breaks there are real consequences, and the violation of the moral law has consequences that are just as real. The moral law is a “fact,” but not an empirical fact. Yet for a long time it has been assumed in many circles of thought that the only facts are empirical ones. Moral facts are not accessible by the sense of sight or smell. They are accessible by the mind’s moral sense, the conscience, which is the intellect apprehending and judging morally. Indeed, a moral law can be said to be more real than a physical law. If a person is apprehended for murder, the moral law he has infringed is regarded by society as more absolute than some physical law that played a part in this grave infringement. The murderer may have been driven by his hunger to attempt a robbery (during which he committed the murder) or by alcoholic drink. Physical

factors and laws influenced the murderer. But the moral law prohibiting unjust killing was seen by the courts to be absolute, whereas the physical need for money was not. One may disregard the law of hunger, but never the right to life. But let us set aside all such discussion, and simply notice the two great objective facts of human experience: that of the “ought,” and that of what “is.” The moral law is an inescapable reality facing every normal human being, and this moral law comes home to each by means of that capacity and act of the mind which we call the conscience.

There is a dim sense in man that this moral law, which dictates that he do this and avoid that, has its origin in an ultimate Obliger. Further, man tends to identify the Origin of the “ought,” this ultimate Obliger, with the Origin, the Creator, of all that “is.” The moral Lawgiver and Judge behind the dictates of conscience he normally takes to be the Creator and Sustainer of all that is. That is to say, he thinks it is *God his Creator* who is dictating to him in the dictate of conscience. Let us not here dwell on the logic of all this, for I am merely tracing the elements of man’s

sense of God. God is viewed as our Creator and our Lawgiver and Judge. He gives us being and the creation around us, and he commands us to act in accord with the moral law. But there is what we might call a deeper yearning of our hearts, and that is for an ultimate Love. We might interpret creation around us as tokens of love, and we might interpret the dictate of conscience as tokens of a Father and Friend — but then again, we might not. Our moral, intellectual and sense experience may not interpret reality in terms of love. The Love behind all could be missed, and our hearts left empty. What has clinched the matter in all this is divine Revelation. God has intervened and revealed his personal *love* for us. He has seen our plight. We are under the oppression of sin, that sin which we have inherited and to which we individually consent. We are enslaved to it just as the children of Israel were enslaved to their oppressors in Egypt. But God has seen us, just as he saw them, and he sent to us our Liberator, Jesus Christ. Now, Christ has not only redeemed us by his blood, he has chosen to enter into

a personal friendship with us. So we are not merely beholden to the God of all that “is” and the God of all that we “ought” do. We are beholden to the God who has *offered us his love*, a love which in Jesus Christ knew no bounds but went to the limits for us and our salvation. The love of Jesus Christ is a greater fact than any of the basic facts of our human experience. God is much more than we might have expected, were we basing ourselves simply on all that “is” and all that “ought” be. He is the God of infinite *love*, who calls us to an intimate friendship with him.

On this feast of St Matthias the Apostle, who was called to an altogether special friendship with the Incarnate God, let us treasure our Lord’s words in our Gospel today. They are words that offer us the gift of divine friendship. *“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be*

complete” (John 15: 9-17). There are many elements in authentic religion and we have just considered some of them. But the crowning element is *love*.

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Second reflection: St Matthias, Apostle (May 14)

Saint Matthias, Apostle: As we read in *The Acts of the Apostles*, after the Ascension of our Lord, Peter proposed that the disciples elect one of their number to take the place of Judas as one of the Twelve. The choice fell upon Matthias. What was Matthias’ background and his subsequent path? We know practically nothing except the very important precondition that St Peter lays down in the election of a replacement for Judas. They were to “*choose someone who has been with us the whole time that the Lord Jesus was travelling round with us, someone who was with us right from the time when John was baptising until the day when he was taken up from us — and he can act with us as a witness to his resurrection.*” (Acts 1:20-26). It seems that Matthias responded to our Lord early and

quickly, and was faithful to him throughout his ministry, even though many of his disciples left him. There were others of this stamp too, and certainly one of them, Justus, was proposed with Matthias for election. Practically nothing is known about Justus either. This is the case with several of the Twelve, and very typical of so many faithful Christians who serve our Lord till the end, and who in the process achieve sanctity. Matthias represented the One who was so much greater than he: Christ and the Church of which he became one of the visible foundation stones.

We, too, are called by our baptism and confirmation to serve and represent divine realities far greater than ourselves. Our path is to serve in humility and dedication, in the midst of ordinariness and obscurity. Like Matthias the Apostle, let us resolve so to live that God will be honoured and glorified.



Our Lady Help of Christians (May 24)

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who placed the love of Our Lady, Help of Christians in the hearts of those who brought the Catholic faith to these shores, grant, through her intercession, wisdom to our leaders and integrity to our citizens, so that, under her protection, Australia may know harmony, justice and peace. Through our Lord.

Scripture today: Sirach 4:11-18; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25;
John 19:25-27

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleopas, and Mary Magdalene. Seeing his mother there with the disciple whom he loved, Jesus said to his mother, "Woman, there is your son." In turn he said to the disciple, "There is your mother." From that hour onward, the disciple took her into his care. (John 19:25-27)

Mary our help For at least eight centuries, each Pope has had his own personal coat of arms that serves as a

symbol of his papacy. It seems that the first Pope whose arms are known with certainty was Pope Innocent IV (1243-1254), although some heraldic scholars have them going back further to Innocent III (1198-1216). One feature of all of them up to Pope John Paul II (1978-2005), is that above the shield is placed the papal triple tiara — the one striking departure from this long custom being the arms of Benedict XVI. On Benedict XVI's own coat of arms the episcopal mitre and pallium replaces the papal tiara. However, in the coat of arms of the *Holy See* and of the *Vatican City State*, Pope Benedict XVI decided to keep the tiara, not a mitre. All the Popes portray the two Keys (of the kingdom of heaven), situated behind the shield, and showing above it. Usually, one of the keys is silver, the other gold — representing the power to bind and loose on earth and in heaven (Matthew 16: 16-19). Now, one very distinctive feature among these papal coats of arms is the figure on the shield of Pope John Paul II. It was a large cross with the figure *M* placed under the right arm of that cross. In this the shield portrayed the Cross of Jesus

Christ, with Mary his mother at the foot of that Cross. I clearly remember when, at John Paul II's commencement of his pontificate in 1978, his coat of arms was published and explained. The shield on that coat set forth Mary the mother of Jesus, and her involvement with the redemptive work of Christ, as being prominent in his papacy from the start. I am sure that there would have been many, even perhaps some Catholics, who viewed such a statement as idiosyncratic and an inappropriate intrusion of the new Pope's personal (and Polish) Marian devotion into the public programme of the papacy and the Church. But it was not. That pictorial statement suddenly appearing in papal heraldry affirms that Mary is the mother and representative of the Church, the help of all Christians, the one above all who was associated in the work of Redemption with Jesus Christ her Son, who is the one and only Redeemer of man. There she stands at the foot of the Cross, with a sword piercing her soul.

That Mary is the mother of God is based on the teaching of the Gospels, on the writings of the Fathers, and

on the express definition of the Church. St. Matthew (1:25) testifies that Mary “*brought forth her first born son*” and that He was called Jesus. As St. John states (1:15), Jesus is the Word made flesh, and this meant that he assumed human nature in the womb of Mary. Inasmuch as Mary was the mother of Jesus, and inasmuch as Jesus was the same divine Person he had been from all eternity and was so from the first moment of His conception, Mary is truly the mother of God. The earliest Fathers, such as St. Ignatius, St. Irenaeus, and Tertullian understood this clearly. The position of Nestorius, denying to Mary the title “Mother of God,” was condemned by the Council of Ephesus (AD 431) which proclaimed Mary to be truly *Theotokos*, the bearer (in the womb) of God. The great Roman basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore was one of the first basilicas built (by Pope Sixtus III) in honour of the Virgin Mary. The purpose was to highlight the role of the Virgin as Mother of God in accordance with the decree issued by the Council of Ephesus. It gave a new intensity and impulse to the Church’s devotion to the mother of

Christ, and this has grown ever since. The two latest dogmas on Mary proclaimed by the Popes have been Mary's immaculate conception free from all sin (decreed by Blessed Pius IX, December 1854), and her assumption body and soul into heaven at the end of her mortal life (promulgated by Pope Pius XII, November 1950). That is to say, that Mary was conceived immaculate and assumed body and soul into heaven, have thus been declared by the Church, through the declaration of these Popes, as being part of divine revelation. The long and the short of this is that Mary the mother of Christ is the *help of Christians*. As our Gospel today portrays (John 19: 25-27), she is the gift of Christ to all of us who are his disciples, and we are Christ's gift to her. She is our mother, we are her children. We ought look on her as the heavenly Queen-Mother who has immense influence before the throne of God. Her intercession is incalculably effective, and she is our own mother in the order of grace. Let us rely on her then, invoking her intercession and looking to her example.

It is generally recognized that Pope John Paul II was a great figure of the end of the twentieth century and the first years of the twenty-first. His funeral was unprecedented in numbers, as was his beatification and canonization not many years later. He was a Marian Pope, as were the great and holy Popes immediately before him. The lesson for all of us is: look to Mary our mother! She is the Help of Christians. She helps us follow in the footsteps of her divine Son. She helps us by her prayers and her incomparable example. *Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death!*



The Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (May 31)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 66 (65):16 Come and hear, all who fear God; I will tell what the Lord did for my soul.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, who, while the Blessed Virgin Mary was carrying your Son in her womb, inspired her to visit Elizabeth, grant us, we pray, that, faithful to the promptings of the Spirit, we may magnify your greatness with the Virgin Mary at all times. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever

(May 31) The Visitation This feast is celebrated between the solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord and the birth of St. John the Baptist, in conformity with the Gospel accounts. The Visitation is the meeting between Mary and her cousin Elizabeth, the mother of St. John the Baptist. Mary's "Magnificat" is another testimony of her humility before God. Her readiness to serve Elizabeth is a good lesson on charity.

Scripture today: Zephaniah 3:14-18; Psalm Isaiah 12;
 Luke 1:39-56

At that time Mary arose and hastened to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the child in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished! And Mary said: My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been looked upon the lowliness of his handmaid. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud

in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants for ever, even as he said to our fathers. Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home. (Luke 1: 39-56)

Mary There are two parts to this precious Gospel passage — the words of Elizabeth, and the words of Mary in response. Luke has assured his reader that “*many have been at pains to set forth the history of what has been brought to fulfilment among us*”. He, too, is resolved to put the story in writing, having “*first traced it carefully from its beginnings*” (1:1-3). So Luke has taken great care with his investigation, and there were many others who were in a position to discount anything that was untrue. Luke devotes the first two chapters to the “beginnings,” including the incident of our Gospel today. The first thing to notice in our passage is that the words of Elizabeth are

her longest recorded, and the words of Mary, too, are her longest recorded. Elizabeth was a holy woman “*approved in God’s sight, and walking blamelessly in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord*” (Luke 1: 6). What she says in the presence of Mary is inspired by the Holy Spirit. She “*was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed*” what she then uttered. God was, through Elizabeth his prophetess, making a loud and clear statement about Mary and her Child, a statement destined to be recorded for all generations to come. Consider, then, her statement. It was a divine pronouncement, not unlike that of the ancient prophecies about the Messiah. Just as in the years to come Elizabeth’s son would, as a prophet of God, identify the Messiah who had come to the people, so his holy mother now, as also one under divine inspiration, points to the Messiah and to his mother who have come to her. The first remarkable feature of her prophecy, understood as the proclamation of a message from the Most High, is that it is “*the mother of my Lord*” who has come to her. She addresses Mary her kinswoman as “*the*

mother of my Lord.” The title “*my Lord*” may denote the Messiah, the promised King in the line of David the king. But it must carry a greater connotation than this, for in the very next sentence “the Lord” is clearly God: “*Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!*”

Whether Elizabeth fully appreciated the words she uttered under inspiration we are not told, but they include in their meaning the divinity of the Child. We are reminded of our Lord’s challenge to his audience when he asked them what David must have meant when he wrote, “The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand till I put your enemies under your feet” — but how could he be his Lord, if he was his son? Mary is the Queen-Mother, the “*mother of my Lord*,” but this title embraced a dimension far transcending the letter of the Messianic prophecies. It encapsulates the reality formally defined at the Council of Ephesus a few centuries later, that Mary is none other than the Mother of God because her son Jesus Christ is God the Son made man. At the arrival of the virgin Mary at the

house of Elizabeth, heaven itself erupts and the Holy Spirit moves the saintly Elizabeth to speak in God's name. How great is the young woman before her! When the Angel Gabriel appeared in the presence of Mary, he addressed her as one so highly favoured — which we translate as “*full of grace*”. *The Lord* was with her, he said to Mary. Here in our scene today, Elizabeth counts herself as “so favoured” because she has been honoured with a visit from the “*mother of my Lord.*” Mary was “*highly favoured*” — for the Lord was with her. Elizabeth is “*so favoured*” because she has Mary with her, Mary who brings the “Lord” with her. She is showing forth the honour to be accorded to the Queen-Mother by all who accept divine Revelation. Ever since the early centuries, and especially since the Council of Ephesus, high honours have been accorded to Mary by Christ's faithful. It was a new thing in the life of Christendom when in the sixteenth century the Protestant Reformers radically reduced these honours. Under divine inspiration, Elizabeth counts herself as most favoured at having received a visit from her who is blessed among

women, from her who is the mother of the Lord, from her who believed — from her who believed that what the Lord had promised would be fulfilled. Elizabeth, acting as the mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit, pronounces Mary worthy of the highest recognition. She has the dignity of being mother of our Messiah and Lord, and of being our model of faith in God and his promises.

The Gospel scene of the Visitation of Mary to her kinswoman Elizabeth involves a revelation about Jesus Christ, and, consequently, his holy mother. The practical side of this is that we ought seek to have Mary the mother of our Lord visit us, indeed, that she stay with us. Let our minds pass from this scene to that other scene of years later. Christ gazes from the Cross and says to his mother, There is your son. Then he says to the beloved disciple, There is your mother. Mary is mother of the Son of God made man, and is our mother, too. *Holy Mary, mother of God! Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.*



Memorial of St Barnabas (June 11)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Acts 11:24 Blessed is this holy man, who was worthy to be numbered among the Apostles, for he was a good man, filled with the Holy Spirit and with faith.

Collect O God, who decreed that Saint Barnabas, a man filled with faith and the Holy Spirit, should be set apart to convert the nations, grant that the Gospel of Christ, which he strenuously preached, may be faithfully proclaimed by word and by deed. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 11:21b 26; 13:1 3; Psalm 98:1-6;

Matthew 10:7-13

Jesus said: "As you go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give. Do not get any gold

or silver or copper to take with you in your belts — no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff, for the worker is worth his keep. Whatever town or village you enter, search there for some worthy person and stay at their house until you leave. As you enter the home, give it your greeting. If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you.” (Matthew 10: 7-13)

For the world The call of Abraham was an event of world significance. So much flowed from it that made of it an occasion of incalculable importance. *“Leave your country .. for the land I will show you; I will make of you a great nation ... In you shall all the families of the earth be blessed”* (Genesis 12:1-3). But at the time scarcely anyone knew of it. The revelation of God to Abraham, and his acceptance of it in faith, was a *family* religion, and it remained a *family* affair for a long time. Abraham’s God was the Lord, and the Lord alone. He believed in the Lord, lived in hope, and did what the Lord commanded him to do. So did his son Isaac, and then his

grandson Jacob. Jacob's sons believed in the Lord too — although they were not an especially impressive lot. They were the twelve Patriarchs of what came to be the *twelve tribes* of Israel (i.e., of Jacob) We are talking here of perhaps half a millennium of difficult and barely perceptible growth of a people who were broadly related in ancestry. They adhered, more or less, to the faith of their revered forefather. Then out of their midst came their great leader Moses, who, like Abraham, received his call from God. Though the phenomenon of this religion was now much larger — still, it was an in-house affair. Yes, it was no longer just a matter of Abraham, his family and his clan chosen by God. It was now, with Moses, a *people, a nation chosen by God* to be his own. For the next millennium or more, the story was the story of this *people* who were being prepared for their mission of bringing a saving Blessing to the world. By means of them, “*all the families of the earth would be blessed.*” As our Lord said to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well, *salvation is from the Jews* (John 4:22). So it was that the Judges such as

Samson and Gideon were raised up to preserve the chosen people. Prophet after prophet followed — Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezechiel, Daniel and others. Their mission was to keep the *chosen people* faithful to the sacred covenant between them and Yahweh their God and to prepare them for the coming of the Day of the Lord and the time when God would bring the promised Blessing. Apart from the distinctive monotheism of the Hebrews and the covenant their God had established with them, the notable thing was that they heralded a great and saving Future for all. A great Hope constantly burned.

Then suddenly there appeared on the scene Jesus of Nazareth, mighty in word and deed — not in a worldly, temporal, political and military sense, but in all matters of God. He spoke the word of God with unprecedented authority, speaking in his own name and referring to God as his own personal and natural Father. His power over nature and the demonic netherworld was unprecedented. He effortlessly claimed not only to be one with God his Father, but as always doing his Father's will. He was

utterly holy — and was addressed even by the demons themselves as such. Not only was he transcendently distinct in his holiness and his claims as to his Person; not only was he distinct in his teaching and in the authority with which he gave it; he was distinct in what he was launching on the scene of the world. He announced that a Kingdom had commenced. It was God's Kingdom, a new Kingdom, the reign and the lordship of God which would bring the Blessing to all the families of the earth. No other prophet had announced or attempted this. Certainly not Elijah, or Elisha, or Jeremiah, or Daniel, or John the Baptist. Christ was bringing an *Imperium* to the world which would *never end*. This brings us to our Gospel today (Matthew 10: 7-13), which presents the beginning of this. Jesus said: "*As you go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.*" God's reign was beginning on the earth and it would be the Blessing for all the earth's families — *all the nations*. When Christ rose

from the dead he stated that all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to him (Matthew 28: 18). They were to go, then, and *make disciples of all the nations* — and he would be with them in the great work (28:19-20). He ascended into heaven and took his place at the right hand of the Father, and at that, the Holy Spirit was sent. From this Sending came a world phenomenon which was the Catholic Church. The Acts of the Apostles is an inspired, though partial, record of the spread of the Kingdom. This Kingdom consists, essentially, in union with Jesus who is the head of his mystical body the Church. Simon Peter holds the keys to the kingdom, and this kingdom or divine lordship is present in its fullness in Jesus Christ.

Salvation, the Blessing for all the families of the earth, was from the Jews — specifically, from the Messiah who is Jesus Christ. This is the Kingdom promised to David, the throne that will never end. Its citizens are all too often men and women with feet of clay, but its burning hearth is the living God incarnate in Jesus Christ, and its animating principle is the Divine Spirit. Without Jesus Christ, the

Church is nothing, but in him the Church has the One for whom man was created, and without whom man is bereft. In our Gospel today, our Lord sends his disciples out to announce the imminence of the Kingdom. That Kingdom has come and is present in Jesus Christ. This is the Blessing for the world. There has been and will be nothing like it.



The Birth of St John the Baptist — Vigil Mass

Entrance Antiphon Lk 1:15, 14 He will be great in the sight of the Lord and will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb; and many will rejoice at his birth.

Collect Grant, we pray, almighty God, that your family may walk in the way of salvation and, attentive to what Saint John the Precursor urged, may come safely to the One he foretold, our Lord Jesus Christ. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture for the Vigil Mass: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 70;

1 Peter 1:8-12;

Luke 1:5-17

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly.

But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well on in years. Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of

the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous — to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. (Luke 1: 5-17)

Faith One of the most obvious convictions embedded in human society is that man ought to be moral. There is a moral law that must be obeyed. Yes, there is a material world out there; there are human beings; there is one's own self and one's immediate world of friends, relatives, acquaintances, daily work — all these are, we might say, concrete objects of daily experience which no-one who can see, hear, feel, touch and taste will deny. If they do deny them, they have got themselves into a psychological and mental tangle. The concrete material world is obvious, and it imposes itself on us as a great fact that is accepted without the slightest question. Now, while there is and has been a strong philosophical current that restricts reality to what is empirically verifiable, nevertheless it is in fact universally accepted that life and the world are also a *moral* reality. That is to say, there is much more to the world than measurable sticks and stones

and material things. Looming over all and suffusing all is the *moral law*, which, of course, cannot be seen, touched or heard physically. The universe imposes itself on us not only by its material resistance and force, but also by its *moral demands*. Though we may not be physically *forced* to assist a dying person before us, we are *morally obliged* to do so. The fact that I am *able* to neglect that person is not the end of the matter. Indeed, of far greater moment and power in the situation is the fact that I *should help* him. All this is to say that the most significant thing in life is *moral obligation*. This is the dominant objective reality before man. Let us take the point a step further and consider not merely the fact that I am obliged to do what is right and to avoid what is wrong — which, as has been suggested, is even more imposing and striking than the obvious fact of the world itself. There is also this: there are *specific* things I *must* do and avoid. I think we could say that for most persons they are summarized in many of the Ten Commandments. You shall not steal; you shall honour your father and your mother; you shall not commit

adultery; you shall not kill; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife and goods; you shall not bear false witness against your neighbour. Even those who do not accept divine revelation — the Ten Commandments are divinely-revealed — will accept most of these obligations towards one's neighbour as being stipulated by the objective moral law.

But what is usually missed by modern secular man (who accepts the moral law, even if he misunderstands its foundation and its nature), is one great area of morality. This is that there are moral obligations to *God*, our Lord and Creator. Just as there are moral obligations in justice towards one's neighbour, and, for instance, to one's parents, so there are moral obligations that man has towards *God*, his Lord and Father. This is not just a matter of religious persuasion or feeling, but of objective morality. These religious obligations of man are summarized somewhat and made specific (to a point) in the first three of the Ten Commandments — but man's moral obligations to God are not simply derived from the Ten

Commandments any more than is the obligation never to murder derived simply from them. Man *naturally* senses, he knows, that he is obliged to acknowledge and worship God (and part of this will be to try *to know* the *true* God). As a matter of fact, characteristically religion has been everywhere, which bears testimony to man's awareness of this moral obligation. But now, let us come nearer our point for today. It is that a special obligation, a moral obligation of great magnitude, springs from the fact of *God speaking to man*. If *God* speaks, then manifestly man has the obligation to listen and to accept his word. Modern man tends to think that the only moral obligations are those which his own intellect will justify to him. Yes, *reason* is clear on the point that you ought never malign your neighbour's good name without sufficient reason, let alone harm him in physical ways. But the moral obligation to *believe*, to have *faith*, to *accept the word of God*? That is a very different matter, so we convince ourselves. Faith is not seen as a moral obligation, incumbent on the conscience and carrying moral sanctions. But it is, and the

entire sweep of divine revelation makes clear that the obligation to *believe* the revealed word of the living God is a basic moral obligation which must be obeyed. While our Lord in his public ministry repeatedly insisted on the fulfilment of God's revealed commandments in all that affects one's neighbour (as in Matthew 25 on the Last Judgment), he was especially insistent on the obligation to *believe God's word*. Faith is a serious moral obligation. That it is a moral obligation is indicated by the fact that there are divine sanctions for the refusal to believe.

Of course, to say that religious faith is a moral obligation includes the proviso that a person realizes that God has indeed revealed certain truths. If a person does not know this formally, any guilt that might be involved is mitigated. But in our Gospel today for the Vigil of the Birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1: 5-17), the Angel reveals things to Zechariah from God. "*Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John..... he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah*". This

was a revelation that required faith as a point of moral obligation. The holy Zechariah, so observant of God's commandments, failed in this at this moment, as we read a little later in Luke's text — and he was punished for it. Let this remind us of the fundamental moral obligation *to believe* the word of God. Our eternity depends on it.

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Second reflection: (Luke 1:5-17)

“Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God”

Our Lord said on one occasion that there was no one born of woman greater than John the Baptist. This would surely refer, in part, to the greatness of John the Baptist's very vocation. His calling was a very great one, and he lived up to it. Both his vocation, and his response to it, were “great.” The angel said that “*He will be great in the sight of the Lord*” (Luke 1: 5-17). He was the forerunner of the Messiah. His calling was, in the words of the angel

in our Gospel text, to bring back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God, and to prepare for the Lord a people fit for him. We ought to dwell on that kind of vocation, that kind of work in life — bringing others back to God their Father. We were made to know, love and serve God here on earth so as to see and enjoy him forever in heaven. It is, then, the greatest possible service that can be rendered to another, to help him know, love and serve God — for that is the purpose of his existence and his primary moral obligation. This kind of service ought pervade the particular work or profession by which we serve others in our daily life. Within our daily setting and service, we ought be also helping them by word, deed and example to know, love and serve God as the one necessary Reality.

How grand is the life of one given over exclusively to bringing *back many of the people to the Lord their God*. The vocation of John the Baptist is a shining reminder of this.



Solemnity of the birth of St John the Baptist (June 24)

Entrance Antiphon Jn 1:6-7; Lk 1:17 A man was sent from God, whose name was John. He came to testify to the light, to prepare a people fit for the Lord.

Collect O God, who raised up Saint John the Baptist to make ready a nation fit for Christ the Lord, give your people, we pray, the grace of spiritual joys and direct the hearts of all the faithful into the way of salvation and peace. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

John the Baptist Born six months before our Lord, St. John the Baptist was the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, our Lady's kinswoman. He was the last and greatest of the prophets. As the forerunner of the Saviour, he had the mission of preparing the Jews for the coming of Christ. When Jesus had come, St. John bore witness to him before his own followers and encouraged them to follow him.

Scripture today Isaiah 49:1-6; Psalm 138; Acts 13:22-26;
Luke 1:57-66.80

When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said, No! He is to be called John. They said to her, There is no one among your relatives who has that name. Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, His name is John. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. The neighbours were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, What then is this child going to be? For the Lord's hand was with him. And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in

the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel (Luke 1:57-66.80).

Vocation Today we think of the birth of John the Baptist, one whom our Lord praised as having no equal among the sons of men (Luke 7:28). We think of what the archangel Gabriel said of him, that he would be great in the sight of the Lord (Luke 1:15). Even from his mother's womb he would be filled with the Holy Spirit. He would bring back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord, and he would prepare for the Lord a people fit for him. He leapt in the womb at the approach of Mary and the unborn Jesus. We remember the course of his life, how he grew to be a great prophet, the greatest of them all and with the greatest of prophetic missions, announcing and pointing out Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus his kinsman, so John declared, he the Lamb of God would take away the sins of the world (John 1:29). John crowned his magnificent life by dying a martyr's death bearing witness to God's truth on marriage (Matthew 14:4). Thinking of his birthday, we are led to think of his great vocation which he lived by being faithful

to the promptings and graces of the Holy Spirit. The very thought of such a vocation has lessons for us all. St Paul writes (Ephesians 1:4) that *before the world began, God chose each one of us in Christ, to be holy and full of love in his sight*. So we each of us received our vocation from before the world began. We all have an eternal calling from God. From all eternity each of us, including John the Baptist, was in the loving mind of God. The providence of God, guiding the history and course of the world and of the universe, was preparing for the coming of each of us, each with his own vocation. John the Baptist had a unique vocation, but each of us too has our own calling from God, a calling originating in eternity. Just as his was unique, so is ours. Just as his was exalted, so is ours — and the words of St Paul just cited from Ephesians make this abundantly clear.

We ought value highly the special choice that God has made of us. God loves me and has chosen me. He has chosen me in the first place for himself. We belong to the Father because we, each of us, have been chosen in Christ.

Just as Christ belongs to the Father because he is his only begotten Son, so we, who are in Christ by the choice of the Father, also belong to the Father for we are his children. Our Lord said that the Father has given each of us to him, to Jesus. And both the Father and the Son have entrusted us to the Holy Spirit to sanctify us and make us holy. And this too was the design of God from the beginning because St Paul says that since the beginning God *chose us in Christ to be holy and full of love in his sight*. He meant us to be holy, and this holiness, we know, comes from and is the work of the Holy Spirit. He is the Sanctifier who is entrusted with the work of our sanctification. St John the Baptist was entrusted to the Holy Spirit too, from his mother's womb. He was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. We receive the Holy Spirit at our baptism. On this feast of the birth of John the Baptist, we ought pray for a renewed appreciation of God's plan for each of us, a renewed appreciation of our vocation to be holy and full of love in the sight of God our heavenly Father. We are meant by God to be saints, whoever we

are, be we a cook, a housewife, mother, student. Whatever might be the circumstances in which the providence of God places us, our vocation is the great constant one — to be more and more like Christ in mind and heart. If there is one thing the study of the lives of the saints ought teach us, it is that no set of circumstances, however untoward they may seem, can *come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus* (Romans 8:39). That love which God has for us is what takes us to sanctity, no matter who we be, no matter what be our situation. What matters is that we put on the mind of Christ in the midst of those circumstances. *Let this mind be in you*, St Paul writes, *that was in Christ Jesus* (Philippians 2:5).

Let us remember that it was Mary who brought Jesus to St John the Baptist. When Mary approached bearing Jesus with her, the gift of the Holy Spirit was granted and John the Baptist leapt in his mother's womb. Mary is our mother and our model in the great project of our life which is to pursue holiness in Jesus Christ. On this feast of the birth of John the Baptist, let us entrust ourselves to God the

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, resolving to live our Christian vocation truly generously.



Saint Peter and Saint Paul — Vigil Mass

Entrance Antiphon Peter the Apostle, and Paul the teacher of the Gentiles, these have taught us your law, O Lord.

Collect Grant, we pray, O Lord our God, that we may be sustained by the intercession of the blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, that, as through them you gave your Church the foundations of her heavenly office, so through them you may help her to eternal salvation. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture for Vigil Mass: Acts 3:1-10; Psalm 18;
Galatians 1:11-20; John 21:15-19

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ he said, ‘you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Feed my lambs.’ Again Jesus said, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He answered, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Take care of my sheep.’

The third time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, 'Do you love me?' He said, 'Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Feed my sheep. Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.' Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, 'Follow me!' (John 21: 15-19)

Love and witness Edmund Campion (1540 – 1581), born five years after the martyrdom by King Henry VIII of both Sir Thomas More and Cardinal John Fisher, was a star on the rise at Oxford University. He took the required Oath of Supremacy (to Anglicanism and the Queen as head of the Church), probably on the occasion of his B.A. degree in 1560, and then his Master's degree at Oxford in 1564. Two years later, Campion welcomed Queen Elizabeth I to the university, and won her lasting

regard. He was selected to lead a public debate in front of the Queen. There were numerous attractions for him: fortune, comfort, fame. But serious religious doubts about his adopted Anglicanism now arose — his opinions were becoming Catholic. Still, at the persuasion of the Anglican Bishop of Gloucester, although holding Catholic doctrines, he received Holy Orders as a deacon in the Anglican Church. Inwardly “*he took* (i.e., experienced) *a remorse of conscience and detestation of mind* (i.e., at what he had done).” A great deal was going on in his noble soul. In the year of 1571, Campion escaped to Douai in the Low Countries (now France) where he was reconciled to the Catholic Church and received the Eucharist that he had denied himself for the past twelve years. He was eventually ordained a Jesuit priest, accepted the contempt of European and English Protestants and put his life at the service of Christ’s Catholic Church. As it turned out, he was ordered into the lion’s den, which is to say back to England for dangerous missionary work there. Later he had this to say to the Queen, in his published script:

“I never had mind and am strictly forbidden by our Father that sent me, to deal in any respect in matters of State or Policy of this realm ... Many innocent hands are lifted up to heaven for you daily by those English students, whose posteritie shall never die, which beyond seas, gathering virtue and sufficient knowledge for the purpose, are determined never to give you over, but either to win you heaven, or to die upon your pikes...cheerfully to carry the cross you lay upon us, and never to despair your recovery, while we have a man left to enjoy your Tyburn, or to be racked with your torments, or consumed with your prisons.” That is to say, love for Christ led him to torture and martyrdom.

Let his well-known case serve as an introduction to our Gospel for the Vigil of the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul (John 21: 15-19). Christ insistently asks Simon Peter, the rock of his Church, if he loves him: *“Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ he said, ‘you know that I love you.’”* This is the foundation of Christian discipleship and

revealed religion. It is a love affair, a love for Jesus Christ founded on Christ's love for us. The first thing in reality, the first thing in the universe, the first thing in human history and in the existence of every human being is the merciful and compassionate love of God — and that divine love is present and revealed in the Person of Jesus Christ. That is the first thing, and on that firm basis is everything else built. The next thing, which is built on this, is man's love for his all-merciful and all-holy God. In our Gospel passage today, Simon knows that Jesus loves him. Christ is asking him if he, in turn, loves his risen Lord. He asks him this three times, perhaps reminiscent of the three denials by Peter during the Passion that he knew his loving Lord. Our Lord is giving Simon the opportunity to renounce the sin of those denials. Simon Peter answers that he does indeed love him, and that Jesus knows he does. He is weak, but will be transformed by the coming of the Holy Spirit. Then our Lord goes on to tell Simon what loving him will involve. It means feeding and caring for his sheep, and doing so unto suffering and death. "*Jesus said,*

'Feed my sheep. Very truly I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.' Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, *'Follow me!'*” Simon Peter was finally crucified. Paul was finally beheaded. Saint Edmund Campion went forth for love of Jesus Christ into the fray of suffering by bearing witness to Christ and his teaching in a regime that had resolutely turned from his Church. Our own Western society and culture does not literally place under the rack those who bear witness to Christ's teachings, but there are many other forms of suffering it imposes on those who speak and show forth the truth revealed by Christ. Christ himself tells us what is to be done for the world of any age: witness to him must be given.

What is the soil in which we are planted in contemporary Western civilization? There is much to be said for it and its great achievements. But it is broadly, if

often silently, hostile to the claims of Jesus Christ — posing all the while behind a façade of liberal tolerance. Our culture is steeped in philosophical relativism, materialism, agnosticism and scepticism. Pope Benedict XVI famously called this cultural climate of relativism a form of dictatorship. There is this world, and that is all there is. Champion accepted this challenge as a glorious one, reflecting the readiness of his divine Lord who came into the world to do the Father's will — which was to bear witness unto death. Let that be our thought as we think of Peter and Paul and the glorious end they attained.



Solemnity of Saint Peter and Saint Paul (June 29)

Entrance Antiphon These are the ones who, living in the flesh, planted the Church with their blood; they drank the chalice of the Lord and became the friends of God.

Collect O God, who on the Solemnity of the Apostles Peter and Paul give us the noble and holy joy of this day, grant, we pray, that your Church may in all things follow the teaching of those through whom she received the beginnings of right religion. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Saints Peter and Paul (d. 64 & 67) Saints Peter and Paul are the principal pillars of the Church founded by Christ.

Peter was chosen by Christ to be his first Vicar on earth; he was endowed with powers of the keys of the kingdom of heaven (Mt 16:13-19) and charged with the role of Shepherd of Christ's flock (Jn 21:15-17). In Peter and his successors, we have a visible sign of unity and communion

in faith and charity. Divine grace led Peter to profess Christ's divinity. St. Peter suffered martyrdom under Nero, in about the year 64 AD. He was buried at the hill of the Vatican where excavations have revealed his tomb on the site of St Peter's Basilica.

Paul was chosen to form part of the apostolic college (without being one of the Twelve) by Christ himself. His mission was to bring Christ's name to the Gentiles. He was beheaded in the Tre Fontane along the Via Ostiense and buried nearby, on the spot of the Basilica of his name.

Scripture today: Acts 12:1-11; Psalm 33;

2 Timothy 4:6-8.17-18; Matthew 16:13-19

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, Who do people say the Son of Man is? They replied, Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. But what about you? he asked. Who do you say I am? Simon Peter answered, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus replied, Blessed are you, Simon son of

Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven (Matthew 16:13-19).

Christ and the Church

It could be said that our passage today is a truly pivotal one in the Gospel of St Matthew. Christ's public ministry begins in chapter 4 with his being led by the Spirit into the desert following his baptism. His temptations follow, his call of his first disciples, the Sermon on the Mount, his wide ranging public ministry with its teachings, and then on the coasts of Caesarea Philippi there is his key dialogue with his disciples. With Simon at their head and speaking in their name, a magnificent and full profession of faith is made. *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"* (Matthew 16:16). The emphasis of the scene is on Jesus Christ, and Christ accepts the declaration — the highest and greatest

statement by his disciples during the public ministry. To this point our Lord had spoken of the kingdom of heaven, what it was like, its conditions of entry and membership. He was the One who would establish it. The Kingdom? Where was it? How to enter it? How to access its benefits? Simon and the disciples have now declared who Jesus is, and on the basis of this faith it was the moment for Christ to take a momentously practical step. He announces that he *will* build his “Church.” According to Matthew’s Gospel account, then, the “Church” had its expressed origin in this divine declaration by Jesus Christ, even though it was not yet a vibrant reality. In Matthew, that formal reality would follow on the Resurrection and the Commissioning by Christ on the Mountain in Galilee (Matthew 28:19-20). At *this* point in his ministry Christ declares formally that he *will* build his Church, and that this Church would be the means of access to the kingdom of heaven about which he had spoken so much and so publicly. Matthew is making it very clear that in Christ’s plan the Church is a necessary and fundamental feature of the work of redemption. The

Church is not, for instance, some accident of history, or some man-made institution which happened to develop due to the initiative of the disciples or the early generations of the Church. It is not the product of a Jesus “movement” of the first generations following Christ’s death and his perceived Resurrection. It was the direct institution of Jesus Christ, his master-plan from the beginning. He announced it to his disciples once he saw and heard their formal declaration of faith in his messiahship and divinity.

There is more to the matter than just this. Christ declares certain fundamental features of the “Church” which he would build. In all of this, let us remember that Matthew is deliberately recording the express declarations of Jesus Christ. Simon is given a new name. His name is to be Rock, “Peter” — *Cephas*, *Petros* — and on this rock — *petra* — Christ will build his Church. *Petros* and *petra* are, of course, Greek words. Their identity is obvious, except that in *Petros* the word *petra* has become masculine because it is now the name for Simon, denoting his office within Christ’s Church. In the Syriac, so close to the

language our Lord spoke, there is little or no difference in genders as there is in the Latin and Greek. The point is simply that it is manifest that not only is the “Church” necessary for entry to the kingdom of heaven, but Simon is to have an indispensable role in the entry. He is the “rock” on which the Church is to be built. Of course, the true Rock is Jesus Christ and faith in him. Simon has just recognized this by his public declaration, speaking on behalf of the disciples to whom our Lord had directed his question. Further, the very declaration and the faith it expresses is, in a sense, the rock on which the Church is built. This is because it is by means of this faith, expressed in these words, that Jesus Christ is accepted and followed. Again, Simon has recognized this too. Notwithstanding this, Christ declares that he, Simon, will be the Rock on which he will build his Church. Built on this Rock, the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. The one sure foundation is Simon and the declaration he makes about Jesus Christ. This is to be built into the very constitution of Christ’s Church. Further, it is to Simon Peter that Christ

will give the keys of the kingdom of heaven. The keys to the kingdom! What power is this! Christ will entrust the kingdom to him and to those who are with him — “*whatsoever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven*” (Matthew 16: 13-19). We have here a remarkable teaching, clearly expressed by Matthew. It is the high point of the public ministry of Jesus Christ in this gospel, and thereupon the countdown begins for his Passion.

It is no surprise that in the declaration of the First Vatican Council of 1870 on the Successor of St Peter, this pivotal text in the Gospel of St Matthew was quoted in full. It states that this teaching of the Council (on the Successor of St Peter) is the “*absolutely manifest teaching of the Sacred Scriptures, as it has always been understood by the Catholic Church*” (Session 4, “On the Church”, chapter 1, no.4). This passage is one of those few texts in the Gospels to which the Church has given a formal and binding interpretation (4, 1, no.6). Let us understand clearly, then,

Christ's intent and plan for the Church, and how important is this plan for us if we are to gain access to the inestimable benefits of life in Jesus Christ.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 16:13-19)

“You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church.” The Church has gradually come to see the enormous significance of these words of our Lord in Matthew's Gospel. Enlightened by the Church's teaching on them we, in our turn, are able to appreciate their significance. There was once a series on television that dealt with the story of Jesus and the infant Church. True to form, our Lord was described as beginning a “movement,” implying of course that the Church is just an outgrowth of, and little more than, the “movement” begun by Jesus. But no, Christ *founded* the “Church” of which he was to be the abiding head. The Church would be — to use the expression of Pope Pius XII — his “mystical” body till the end of time. An essential element of the Church's

constitution is the office to which Simon was appointed to be the visible rock of the Church. Just as the Apostles have their successors in the bishops, so Simon Peter has his successors in the Bishops of Rome. The Church is built on this college. We ought to be profoundly aware of the apostolic character of the Church of which we are members. Our Christian life should be characterised by communion with this one universal Church which comes from the Apostles, and through them from Christ. Our communion with the universal Church is expressed and nourished by our communion with the Bishop of Rome, the successor of Peter who is the visible rock of the Church and the bearer of the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Pope St Pius X once wrote that it is not possible for a member of the Church to be holy if he deliberately refuses to love the Pope. Let us then love the Pope, receive his teaching as coming from Christ, be imbued with it, and steadily put it into practice.



St Thomas the Apostle (July 3)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 118 (117):28, 21 You are my God, and I confess you; you are my God, and I exalt you; I will thank you, for you became my Saviour.

Collect Grant, almighty God, that we may glory in the Feast of the blessed Apostle Thomas, so that we may always be sustained by his intercession and, believing, may have life in the name of Jesus Christ your Son, whom Thomas acknowledged as the Lord. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

St. Thomas the Apostle Among the apostles, Thomas is remembered mainly for his doubts about the resurrection of Christ. Eight days after the Resurrection, he made up for his unbelief with a profession of faith, “My Lord and my God!” (Jn 20:28). According to tradition, he preached the Gospel in India, where he was martyred.

Scripture today: Ephesians 2:19-22; Psalm 116;

John 20:24-29

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, We have seen the Lord! But he said to them, Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it. A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, Peace be with you! Then he said to Thomas, Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe. Thomas said to him, My Lord and my God! Then Jesus told him, Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. (John 20:24-29)

Belief William Kingdon Clifford (1845–1879) was an English geometer, mathematician and philosopher. Among other things, building on the work of Hermann

Grassmann, he introduced what is now termed geometric algebra. He died a couple of months before John Henry Newman was made a Cardinal, which is to say some nine years after the publication of Newman's great work on religious belief, *A Grammar of Assent*. While he had nothing personally to do with Newman, Clifford certainly represented the mindset Newman combated. He presented religious scepticism as a moral imperative. At the age of thirty-one, he delivered his paper, "The Ethics of Belief" (1876), to the (English) Metaphysical Society, of which he was a member. Arguing that it was immoral to believe things for which one lacks evidence, his article contains the famous principle that "*it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.*" This article on belief is now well-known as putting the case for the immorality of religious belief. He wrote that "*If a man, holding a belief which he was taught in childhood or persuaded of afterwards, keeps down and pushes away any doubts which arise about it in his mind, purposely avoids the reading of books and the company of men that call in*

question or discuss it, and regards as impious those questions which cannot easily be asked without disturbing it — the life of that man is one long sin against mankind.”

Clifford and his (similarly non-believing) wife are buried in London’s Highgate Cemetery just north of the grave of Karl Marx. In reading his article, which is commonly regarded as emblematic of modern agnosticism, we notice among other things that he writes: *“We may go beyond experience by assuming that what we do not know is like what we do know; or, in other words, we may add to our experience on the assumption of a uniformity in nature.”*

Let us note: this, on his own admission, is an “assumption”. He concludes that *“No evidence, therefore, can justify us in believing the truth of a statement which is contrary to, or outside of, the uniformity of nature.”* I repeat, this is an assumption, one similar to the assumptions involved earlier in David Hume’s attack on the possibility of miracles. Here, though, I do not propose to critique Clifford — I just wish to illustrate, in him, the contemporary rejection of the Supernatural.

One result of the firm acceptance of the assumption that all must be uniform with “nature” is that if any proposition is not — such as the rising from the dead of Jesus Christ — then, of course, the one proposing it has been duped in some way. It is deemed as certainly not a truth. Now, a rising from the dead is not “uniform with nature”, because in our experience people never rise from the dead. Death is a terrible and final fact. Despite this, though, many people saw the living Jesus risen from the dead and in the flesh, though glorious. The fact was tested *empirically*, we may say — people touched, felt, saw and heard him. The risen Jesus was empirically measured — the fact was subjected to the observation of the senses. If the reply to this is that, well, they were duped, how then would *anything* of this kind — a rising from the dead of an exceptionally good man who predicted the fact — be tested *empirically*? Must we have the whole world of every generation throughout history touch, see and feel the risen Jesus? That is absurd. Today we think of St Thomas the Apostle. There are several things we can think of in

Thomas, and one of them is his uncannily contemporary demand for empirical evidence. Thomas *assumed* that all must be in accord with the uniformity of nature: “*Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, We have seen the Lord! But he said to them, Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.*” He wanted to measure the physical fact. Only then would he “believe” — after all, what the other disciples claimed was not in accord with the uniformity of nature. Well, he got what he bargained for: “*A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, Peace be with you! Then he said to Thomas, Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.*” There is this about Thomas, though. When Christ gave him the tangible proof he insisted on, Thomas instantly rose to a magnificent belief: “*Thomas said to him,*

My Lord and my God! Then Jesus told him, Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20: 24-29). In his faith, Thomas manifested the presence in him of a great and sufficient moral pre-disposition.

This is the point. To accept the incarnate Son of God and his unique claims, more is required than mere “evidence”, let alone “evidence” that assumes the uniformity of nature. What is needed is a moral disposition and readiness to accept what will actually be life-changing. The encounter with the risen Jesus gave to Thomas’s life a new and special spring, as it did for the rest of the Apostles. Thomas went on to a life of unwearied witness to Jesus to the ends of the earth. His tomb is venerated in India. He brought the good news that death is now the door to a wondrous life if we but live in Jesus Christ by faith and Baptism. That is the Kingdom.



St Mary Magdalene (Feast) (July 22)

Entrance Antiphon Jn. 20:17 The Lord said to Mary Magdalene: Go to my brothers and tell them: I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.

Collect O God, whose Only Begotten Son entrusted Mary Magdalene before all others with announcing the great joy of the Resurrection, grant, we pray, that through her intercession and example we may proclaim the living Christ and come to see him reigning in your glory. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Song of Songs 3:1-4; Psalm 62;

John 20:1-2, 11-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, They have taken the Lord out of the

tomb, and we don't know where they have put him! But Mary stood outside the tomb weeping. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the feet. They asked her, Woman, why are you weeping? They have taken my Lord away, she said, and I don't know where they have put him. At this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realise that it was Jesus. Woman, he said, why are you weeping? Who is it you are looking for? Thinking he was the gardener, she said, Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him. Jesus said to her, Mary. She turned towards him and cried out in Hebrew, Rabboni! (which means Teacher). Jesus said, Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: I have seen the Lord! And she told them that he had said these things to her. (John 20:1-2, 11-18)

Magdalene There are various personages of the New Testament, and in particular of the Gospels, who are celebrated in the Church's liturgical year as Saints. For instance, there is Joseph the husband of Mary and foster-father of Jesus Christ. There are the infants who were murdered in Bethlehem by Herod out of hatred for Christ, celebrated a few days after Christmas as the Holy Innocents. John the Baptist is celebrated not only in his death, but in his birth. Each of the Apostles (at times combined), including Matthias who replaced Judas, is celebrated with a Feast Day. So too, Saints Paul, Barnabas, Luke and Mark all have their Feast Days. Martha, the sister of both Lazarus and Mary, has her Memorial Day. Various ones are missing, which is not to say that they are not saints — but the Church does not formally celebrate their holy lives. There is no celebration of Simeon and Anna, nor of Elizabeth and Zechariah, nor of Lazarus whom Jesus loved and whom he raised from the dead. The greatest of the New Testament figures apart from the Saviour himself is his own mother, the one whom the

Angel addressed as being the one “*full of grace.*” “*The Lord is with you,*” he said to her. There are various celebrations of the mother of the Lord during the Church’s year — her birth, the Angel’s Annunciation to her, her Visitation to Elizabeth, her Assumption, her Sorrows, and other days such as our Lady of the Rosary, our Lady of Fatima and Mary Help of Christians. Today we are asked by the universal Church to contemplate the figure of *Mary of Magdala*. If we consider her in the context of others of Christ’s disciples in the Gospels, she stands forth as an especially celebrated disciple. In particular, in John’s Gospel she appears as the first one to speak to Jesus on his rising from the dead, and the first to bring news of the empty tomb and then of his resurrection. There is nothing to prevent us from presuming that the first to whom our Lord appeared was his own mother, but this had no public repercussion in terms of the spread of the news. Christ’s appearance to Mary of Magdala was, in St John’s vivid account, the first step in the rapid spread of word that Jesus

had risen. In what has been called the “longer ending” of Mark, it is the same (Mark 16:9).

According to Luke 8:2, Christ healed “*Mary called Magdalene out of whom went seven demons.*” In reporting that when he rose from the dead Christ appeared “*first to Mary Magdalene,*” Mark (in the “longer ending”) adds “*out of whom he had cast seven devils*” (Mark 16:9). Some Christian saints have interpreted this liberation from demon-possession as implying that she had been full of vices and sunk in the thralldom of sin. While this is possible, it does seem to be an assumption because the Gospels do not formally state that demon-possession was necessarily due to personal moral fault. In Luke 9:39 we read that a man in the crowd called out to our Lord asking him to heal his *son* who was often subject to demon-possession. He was his only son, and Jesus’ disciples could not cast the demon out. The symptoms as described by the father appear to us as some form of epilepsy, but it was the “demon” that was behind it. Christ cast it out at a word. This was a *boy*, and it would be

presumptuous to assert that his helplessness at the hands of a demon was due to his own moral failure. We get the impression from the Gospels that the widespread demon-possession was due primarily to the general fallen condition of man rather than to the particular sins of this or that possessed person. People were exposed to the attack of the netherworld, and Satan's boast to Christ that all the kingdoms of the world were his (Luke 4: 6) had an element of truth in it. Christ came to reverse this situation, and his liberation of persons such as Mary of Magdala were portents of what was soon to come. So Mary of Magdala, as one who had been bound by seven demons, is a representative of the fallen family of man. Her spirit was helpless before the Enemy. But then came the stronger Man, and he effortlessly gained the victory and took out the spoils. Thus liberated, Mary of Magdala's spirit marvellously blossomed and was flooded with love for her Master. She became the quintessential disciple of Jesus Christ, which is to say, one overflowing with a personal love for him. She followed him in love to Calvary, and

stood there watching the Redemption being effected, in the company of Mary the mother of all the living.

St Mary of Magdala is among the first Christian saints, and we may presume that she will be celebrated as such in the Church's liturgical year till the end of the world. She is a particularly attractive personage because of her being liberated by Jesus Christ from her bondage and her becoming totally given over to the love and following and service of Jesus Christ. We do not know with historical certainty the course of her life after the Ascension and spread of the infant Church, but the essential thing about her we do know. She was faithful unto death to her Master and Lord, and she never looked back in her growth in holiness. Let us imitate her, then!

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Second reflection: (John 20:11-18)

“Jesus said, ‘Mary!’ She knew him then and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbuni!’” The Gospels tell us that

Our Lord drove seven devils out of St Mary Magdalene. There was, then, a point where she reached the depths of degradation and helplessness. This leads us to think of human weakness and of the power of Christ raising up helpless man. Whatever be our weakness as well as the particular way in which we are prone to sin, Christ can set us free. Mary Magdalene, having been freed from the clutches of Satan, became an ardent follower of Christ — which involved her full cooperation. She became very good soil for the seed coming from Christ the Sower. She continued to grow in fidelity by personal choice.

Let us, considering the example of St Mary Magdalene, make the same choice to grow constantly in fidelity, renewing this choice each day, together with a persevering spirit of repentance. Consider how far Mary of Magdala had come along this road by the day of Christ's resurrection, as we see it in today's Gospel! Let us resolve to do likewise.



Feast of St James the Apostle (July 25)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Mt 4:18, 21 As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother mending their nets and he called them.

Collect Almighty ever living God, who consecrated the first fruits of your Apostles by the blood of Saint James, grant, we pray, that your Church may be strengthened by his confession of faith and constantly sustained by his protection. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

St James, Apostle. He is called “the Greater” because his vocation to serve Christ preceded that of the other apostle of that name. He was the son of Zebedee, and was called by Jesus together with his brother John. James was one to the three apostles, along with Peter and John, who on the mountain witnessed the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1) and the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew

26:37). He was condemned to death by Herod Agrippa and beheaded in the year 44, the first martyr among the Apostles. He was numbered by St Paul among the Pillars of the Church at Jerusalem, together with Peter and John.

Scripture today: 2 Corinthians 4:7-15; Psalm 126:1bc-6;
Matthew 20:20-28

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, with an act of profound reverence, proceeded to ask something of him. What is it you want? he asked. She said, Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom. You don't know what you are asking, Jesus said to them. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink? We can, they answered. Jesus said to them, You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father. When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, You know that the rulers of the

Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave — just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Matthew 20:20-28)

Drinking the cup

Consider the first two sentences of our Gospel scene today. The mother of James and John approached Jesus with her two sons. She loved her two sons, and must have raised them with a profound religious faith. They were excellent sons of Abraham. At least John had been, we may conclude from the first chapter of St John's Gospel, a disciple of John the Baptist. Today we think in a special way of his brother James. If John had been a disciple of John the Baptist, presumably his brother James was too. Together with Simon and Andrew they had been among the very first to be formally called by our Lord to follow him (Matthew 4: 18-22), and they had the full support of their mother. Their ambition, and that of their mother, was that they follow Jesus to the

very hilt. They aspired to be on his right and his left in the fullness of his kingdom. He was their life, and their mother approached Jesus to present hers and their petition. Let us notice two things about this moment. Firstly, she presents the petition. She is the intercessor — it is her prayer and theirs, but there was a special strength, it seems, in *her* asking him on their behalf. It reminds us of the importance of our praying for people, including those who are close to God as her two sons doubtlessly were. It also shows that we ought gratefully accept the prayers of others on our behalf, and seek the prayers of those now with God in heaven. The angels and the saints share in the intercessory work of Christ our High Priest before the throne of God our Father. So then, the mother of the sons of Zebedee approached our Lord, with her sons on her right and left, and interceded for them. We notice not only this feature of her prayer, but her profound reverence before the person of Jesus. The Greek word (*proskunousa*) implies a form of worship and going down on one's knees. She approached Jesus with an act of the deepest reverence —

showing us what it is to present our petitions to Christ. If we act with deep reverence when at prayer, the action itself assists us in being reverent in spirit. Pope John Paul II would pray at times prostrate on the floor before the Blessed Sacrament — and I have read that his own Archbishop (when Karol was a seminarian), Adam Stefan Cardinal Sapieha, was seen to do the same. Praying on one's knees has a long pedigree in the tradition of physical posture during prayer.

Let us resolve to pray with deep reverence before Christ, the Holy One of God. Let us also resolve to intercede for others, as did the mother of the sons of Zebedee at this moment. But let our gaze turn now to the Lord who was being petitioned. We notice that at her act of reverence, he immediately asked her what she wished him to do for her — *what do you want? (ti theleis;)*. She loved him, they loved him, and they were before him in genuine reverence with a petition. Granted the heart of Jesus Christ, it is as if he could not but want to grant the request, whatever it might be. That is what we ought

expect to be the attitude of Christ our Lord in respect to our petitions too, especially if we, like them, have the ambition to love and serve him generously. They wished to be the friends and close followers of Jesus — well, let us have that same ambition. We can expect the same willing response. Their hopes were probably mixed with a little self-interest. Possibly they wanted to be prominent in the glory to come, and *our* motives may well be somewhat mixed — for all we know. But still, let us resolve to love Jesus Christ just as they had this resolve. Do I wish to be a friend of Jesus Christ? Then I ought approach him with all my petitions, with all my ambitions to follow him closely, and with all my requests for others both living and dead with the same confidence in his willingness to hear my petition. He will assuredly ask me, “*What do you want?*” I ought have faith in Jesus Christ, expecting this kind of response. All too often people do not ask God for what they want and need because they do not think, in their heart of hearts, that God is able to answer their petitions, or that he wants to. They may even not think that God is very

real, anyway. But Christ manifestly wanted to answer the request of the mother of the sons of Zebedee. The problem was that they did not know what they were asking and what it would entail — for them. This is something we ourselves constantly overlook in the petitions we present to God. Our requests may entail difficulties of which we have no idea. Still, let us present them, with the readiness to do and to accept whatever God may ask of us in our turn. *Can you drink the cup I shall drink? We can*, they answered. They were ready to do whatever he wanted.

James and his brother John did not get what they asked for in the precise terms of their request. It ran counter to the sovereign plan of God. But our Lord was pleased with what lay behind it, and they received from him the one thing that mattered: the assurance that they would *drink his cup*. This is the important thing. This, then, is what we ought be praying for: that it be granted us to drink the cup that Jesus Christ drank. There is nothing more important than this. If we share in the sufferings of Christ as his friends, then we shall share in his resurrection.

On this feast of St James, let us resolve to approach Jesus Christ daily with the same profound reverence and confidence, and with this all-important petition on our lips.

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Second reflection: (Matthew: 20:20-28)

“Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?”

When St Josemaria Escriva received his inspiration from God in 1928 to begin the work of his life, he imposed on himself not only more ardent prayer but more penance. Furthermore, he solicited from as many as he could both prayer and penance for his great intention. He always taught that expiation is essential to the Christian life and to the successful outcome of God’s work. He lamented that for so many Christians there is a great fear and reluctance in respect to *expiation*. In our Gospel passage for today (Matthew: 20:20-28), the feast of St James the brother of John, our Lord himself makes all this abundantly clear. The mother of James and John wanted him to give them a

special share in his glory. Our Lord said that they did not know what they were asking. They had to drink the cup he was to drink. Were they ready to do this? They said, yes. It is wonderful that Our Lord assured them that they would. Their very answer was the fruit of a grace, perhaps a grace that came in answer to their petition to stand with Christ at his side in his glory. They would be faithful to him in sharing in his sufferings. That was the all-important condition for future glory.

Let us recognise our reluctance to follow Our Lord along the path of expiation and self-denial. Let us pray repeatedly for a profound appreciation of its indispensable character in the Christian life, and let us continually ask for the *grace* to follow Christ along his own road of self-denial. Thus shall we share in his glory.



Saint Martha (Memorial) (July 29)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Lk 10:38 Jesus entered a village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home.

Collect Almighty ever living God, whose Son was pleased to be welcomed in Saint Martha's house as a guest, grant, we pray, that through her intercession, serving Christ faithfully in our brothers and sisters, we may merit to be received by you in the halls of heaven. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

St Martha Our Lord Jesus Christ liked the home of Martha, her brother Lazarus, and her sister Mary. As our Lord's friends in Bethany, they took loving care of him. We should ask God to help us unite Martha's intense work and faith with Mary's contemplation. In this way, we live unity of life by which we always stay close to the Lord.

Scripture today: 1 John 4:7-10; Psalm 33;

John 11:19-27 or Luke 10:38-42

Many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home. Lord, Martha said to Jesus, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask. Jesus said to her, Your brother will rise again. Martha answered, I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day. Jesus said to her, I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this? Yes, Lord, she told him, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world. (John 11:19-27)

Martha's example “Martha” is a Greek translation of the Judeo-Aramaic word which means “the Lady,” the feminine form of “the Master.” There is an inscription with

the name dated about 5 AD, now in the Naples Museum. In the Gospel of St Luke, Martha and her sister Mary appear in one scene (Luke 10: 38-42) which is an alternative Gospel for today, the Memorial day of St Martha. In this scene, Martha received our Lord into the house (as if “the lady” of the house). She then does the serving while Mary is at the feet of Jesus listening to him speaking. Lazarus is not mentioned by St Luke in that passage. In the Gospel of St John both sisters appear in two scenes, the raising from the dead of their brother Lazarus (John 11: 43-44) and the anointing of Jesus at the home of Simon the Leper (John 12:3). In this latter scene from John 12, as in the scene from Luke 10, Martha is doing the serving while Mary is at the feet of Jesus — but this time Mary is anointing his feet (John 12:2). In the past, many have interpreted Mary, the sister of Martha, to have been Mary Magdalene. But there is no specific warrant for this in the Gospels. I myself regard it as unfounded and I welcome the current departure from that traditional view (which I respect). But our subject here is

Martha whom the Church formally recognizes as a saint of the Church's liturgical year — there is no such celebration for Lazarus and Mary, unless we accept that Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, is Mary Magdalene. In St Luke's mention of the two sisters, Martha is described *first*: Martha received Jesus into her house, and she had a sister named Mary. While Mary is praised by Christ, Martha is the object of attention. She actively serves Christ whom she has received, but in her service we are given a teaching from Jesus Christ. Altercating mildly over the inactivity of her sister, she receives from him his gentle correction in which he holds up the example of Mary who has chosen the good thing, the one thing necessary. We may take Martha, then, to be an instance of the active disciple and lover of Jesus Christ. The active disciple must remember that in all life's busy service of Christ and neighbour, one's heart must be kept directed to Jesus and his word. It is a lesson from the Lord which St Luke included for the Church's children in the ages to come.

In our Gospel today which is from John, once again Martha is the active one. Interestingly, at the beginning of the incident (John 11: 1), Mary is mentioned before Martha — *“There was a certain man ailing, Lazarus from the town of Mary and her sister Martha.”* But this could be because St John wishes immediately to refer to the scene soon to come of Mary’s anointing the feet of Jesus (11:2). After all, we notice a few verses later that Martha is mentioned first: *“Now Jesus loved Martha, and her sister, and Lazarus”* (11:5), and again, *“Many of the Jews came to Martha and Mary, to comfort them concerning their brother”* (11: 19). Further, as soon as Martha heard that Jesus was coming, *she* went to meet him, *“but Mary remained seated in the house”* (11: 20). Martha welcomed him, and was the first to say, *“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died”* (11:21) — a statement repeated by Mary when she went to meet Jesus (11: 32). The most notable thing about Martha as presented by St John in this chapter is her striking profession of faith. One wonders whether this is not the centrepiece of the chapter.

In other chapters our Lord expects faith before he works his miracle, and it is *following* this profession of Martha's faith that Christ works one of his most spectacular miracles of his public ministry. He does this right under the nose of his enemies in the City who were poised to arrest him wherever he could be found. The miracle is a proclamation of his Person as the giver of life before his great act of self-offering at Calvary. Christ states to Martha, "*I am the resurrection and the life: the one who believes in me, even though he be dead, will live*" Then he asks with insistence, *Do you believe this?* Time and again in his Gospel, St John shows that everything pivots on faith in Jesus and his word. In the plan of God, faith in the word of Christ is the foundation. It is on this basis that Christ acts time and again. At the end of his Gospel, St John tells the reader that he has written it so as to show that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. *Believing* this, he will find life in his name (20:31). This is the teaching of Christ in his words to Martha (11: 25-26). This is the faith Martha professes: "*Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the*

Son of God". Martha gives a magnificent profession of faith, one that is an exemplification of the faith in Jesus Christ about which the Gospel of St John was written.

In the Gospel of St Matthew (16: 16) Simon Peter gave the same profession of faith before our Lord that St Martha gives in the Gospel of St John: "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*" It evoked high praise from Christ and occasioned his appointment of Simon as the Rock of the Church he would build. To him Jesus would give the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Martha has that same fullness of faith, and is a grand model for us. For purposes of contrast, and for emphasis on Martha, let us say that Simon stands for the Apostles and perhaps for the Church's ordained hierarchy. Martha stands, we might say, for the far larger component of Christ's Church, the lay faithful. Let us take her inspiring example to heart!

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Second reflection: (John 11:19-27)

“I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who was to come....”

On one occasion (Luke 10:38-42), Our Lord is in the home of Martha and Mary. Mary is saying little, perhaps nothing, for she is engrossed in every word that our Lord utters. Martha is busy — at that moment, far too busy as far as our Lord is concerned. She is serving him with love but is frustrated with what appears to be Mary's thoughtlessness and inactivity. She complains to our Lord about her sister, and receives a gentle (and perhaps smiling) rebuke. She is worrying about too many things rather than the one thing necessary. The scene does show Martha's confident familiarity with our Lord. She unhesitatingly complains to him. In a later scene (John 11:19-27), that of our Lord's raising of her brother Lazarus to life, we see her boundless faith in our Lord. She believes that he can do anything, and she believes that he is the Christ the Son of God, the one who had to come into

this world. St John wrote his Gospel precisely in order that people might believe just this (John 20:31), and so Martha is presented to us by the Evangelist as a great example of Christian faith. Moreover inasmuch as time and again our Lord acted when he saw the faith of those who requested something of him, we can presume that it was at least partly because of her great faith in him that he proceeded to raise Lazarus from the dead.

Martha actively served our Lord's Person with a heart brimful of faith in his power and in his true identity. Let us fill our days with a similar faith in Jesus, a faith like that of Martha's.



The Transfiguration of the Lord (August 6)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Mt 17:5 In a resplendent cloud the Holy Spirit appeared. The Father's voice was heard: This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.

Collect O God, who in the glorious Transfiguration of your Only Begotten Son confirmed the mysteries of faith by the witness of the Fathers and wonderfully prefigured our full adoption to sonship, grant, we pray, to your servants, that, listening to the voice of your beloved Son, we may merit to become co heirs with him. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

The Transfiguration of the Lord This feast became widespread in the West in the 11th century and was introduced into the Roman calendar in 1457 to commemorate the victory over Islam in Belgrade. Before that the Transfiguration was celebrated in the Syrian,

Byzantine and Coptic rites. The Transfiguration foretells the glory of the Lord as God, and His ascension into heaven. It is an anticipation of the glory in heaven, where we shall see God face to face. We already share in this life, through grace, in the divine promise of eternal life.

Scripture today: Daniel 7:9-10.13-14; Psalm 96;

2 Peter 1:16-19; Matthew 17:1-9 (A)

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters- one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah. While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him! When the disciples heard this, they fell face down to

the ground, terrified. But Jesus came and touched them. Get up, he said. Don't be afraid. When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead. (Matthew 17:1-9)

Transfiguration If one sets the Gospels next to other historical accounts of that era, an obvious characteristic of the Gospel accounts is its extensive featuring of the *miracles* of Jesus Christ. Now, one of the many differences between the first three Gospels — so similar to one another as to be called the Synoptics — and the Gospel of St John, is in their presentation of the *miracles* of Christ. In John's Gospel, a mere handful of miracles are portrayed, but their significance is explored in depth. In chapter one there is no miracle, and in chapter two there is but one. In chapters seven and eight there are no miracles, while extensive passages are given of the words of Christ, and they constitute teaching of great depth about the Trinity and the Incarnation. The Synoptic

Gospels narrate numerous miracles and often with little commentary. There are many exorcisms by Christ in the Synoptics, while exorcisms are lacking in St John. Some other things which the three Synoptics narrate remain unmentioned by St John. While the Synoptics give an account of the institution of the Eucharist, this is passed over by St John (except in presenting the context) — whereas he chooses to give Christ's teaching on the Eucharist (in Chapter 6) much more extensively than do the Synoptics, but in an entirely different setting. Especially intriguing is what we might call the tone of the Gospel narration of the miracles. There is little attempt to prove their historical reality — they are narrated in a simple and matter-of-fact fashion as if they were the last thing anyone could question. Their truth is assumed, taken for granted. In fact, I suspect that this lack of attempt in the Gospels to “prove” the historicity of the miracles is what feeds the contemporary Enlightenment prejudice against their objective truth. Observe the sobriety and brevity of the accounts of the miraculous Transfiguration in

the Synoptics. That, I suggest, is itself convincing. It is presented as simple fact, but plainly it was extraordinary. When Moses came down from the Mountain his face was aglow because of his encounter with God. The glory of God had its physical impact on him, and he had to wear a veil when among the people. The Transfiguration of Christ was very different, far grander, and without parallel in the history of Israel.

Let us pause a little on this. The phenomena manifesting God's glory on Mount Sinai was so great as to be witnessed by the people, and Moses' very countenance glowed as a result. Of course, Moses' shining face was not a manifestation of his own glory, whereas the dazzling transfiguration of the whole of Jesus Christ's figure did indeed manifest his glory. While Yahweh God showed his glory on the Mountain of Sinai, on the Mountain of our Gospel scene it is Jesus Christ who shows his glory, and heaven attests to it too. First and foremost, the divine Voice from the bright cloud reveals to the three witnesses that the Man before them, in whom they see so much glory,

is God the Son. So then, while on Mount Sinai Yahweh God revealed his glory, on the Mountain of our Gospel scene the Son reveals his glory, and this is attested by the Father. It is also attested by the Old Testament tradition in the persons of Moses the giver and representative of the Law, and the prophet Elijah the representative of the prophetic tradition. On the Mountain of Sinai the glory of Yahweh directed the people to his Commandments, written on the stone tablets, as their Law. Great was their God, and they saw his glory in the thunder and spectacle. Moses came down from the Mountain with his Law, and they were to obey it. On the Mountain of our Gospel scene, not only was the glory of Jesus Christ seen (as it had, to a point, in the signs that were his miracles). It was also revealed that all were to listen to him. *This is my Son, listen to him!* So here was the new Lawgiver on the Mountain, a new Moses and much more. He was God the Son, speaking on his own behalf and on behalf of Yahweh God his Father. A new Covenant was about to be established with a new Law and a new Sacrifice. The

disciples were not to speak of the vision till the Son of Man had risen from the dead. Then the Sacrifice would be consummated and the new Law, that of the Holy Spirit, would be entrusted to the Church. The greatest miracle of our Lord's public ministry was the Transfiguration, in which he was miraculously revealed in glory, reminiscent of the glory revealed on Sinai long before.

Let us place ourselves lovingly in the scene of the Transfiguration, while we remember the event of over a millennium before. Our scene today was witnessed by only three — the coming “pillars” — whereas Sinai was witnessed by a people. But millions know it now, and its significance far surpasses that of Sinai. The Teacher of mankind was revealed in his glory, and the Father of all pointed to him as the One to whom all his children were to listen. His word is the new Law, together with the divine Spirit he won for us by his Sacrifice. Let us take our stand with him, for in him is found our salvation.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 17:1-9)

“There in their presence he was transfigured: his face shone like the sun”

One of the features of modern day life is the enormous industry generated by the thought of and preparation for the *future*. For instance, every employer has a considerable concern for the superannuation and retirement entitlements of the employees. People think of the future and prepare for it. But of course, we are referring here to future temporal interests: our future *this* side of the grave. The sad fact is that too few people prepare for what will happen just a little later than this, on the *other* side of the grave. Ordinary prudence would dictate that we ought to live in such a way as to be prepared not only for a future temporal rest and security, but for rest and security in *eternity*. Today we think of how, not long before his Passion and Death, our Lord was given — and his disciples saw — a foretaste of his future glory. It surely consoled and strengthened our Lord,

humanly speaking. So, too, the thought of our future glory should profoundly affect and orient our present temporal course. If we do this, it will be a source of true consolation.

Let us live daily in the light of our true homeland, making every day a worthy preparation for it. Let us live for God here, so as to possess him in heaven forever.



Solemnity of St Mary MacKillop (August 8 - Australia)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Mt 25:34, 36, 40 Come, you blessed of my Father, says the Lord: I was sick, and you visited me. Amen, I say to you: whatever you did for one of the least of my brethren, you did it for me.

Collect O God, source of all goodness, who have shown us in Saint Mary a woman of faith living by the power of the Cross, teach us, we pray, by her example to live the gospel in changing times and to respect and defend the human dignity of all in our land. Through our Lord.

St Mary MacKillop (1842 - 1909) (Australia) On January 15, 1842 Mary MacKillop was born of Scottish parents, Alexander MacKillop and Flora MacDonald in Fitzroy, Victoria. This was less than seven years after Faulkner sailed up the Yarra, when Elizabeth Street was a deep gully and Lonsdale Street was still virgin bush. A plaque in the footpath now marks the place of her birth in Brunswick Street, Fitzroy. Mary, the eldest of eight children, was well

educated by her father who spent some years studying for the priesthood in Rome but through ill health had returned to his native Scotland until 1835 when he migrated to Australia with his parents. Unfortunately, he lacked financial competence, so the family was often without a home of their own, depending on friends and relatives and frequently separated from one another. From the age of sixteen, Mary earned her living and greatly supported her family, as a governess, as a clerk for Sands and Kenny (now Sands and MacDougall), and as a teacher at the Portland school. While acting as a governess to her uncle's children at Penola, Mary met Father Julian Tenison Woods who, with a parish of 22,000 square miles/56,000 square kilometres, needed help in the religious education of children in the outback. At the time Mary's family depended on her income so she was not free to follow her dream. However, in 1866, greatly inspired and encouraged by Father Woods, Mary opened the first Saint Joseph's School in a disused stable in Penola. Young women came to join Mary, and so the Congregation of the Sisters of St

Joseph was begun. In 1867, Mary was asked by Bishop Shiel to come to Adelaide to start a school. From there, the Sisters spread, in groups to small outback settlements and large cities around Australia, New Zealand, and now in Peru, Brazil and refugee camps of Uganda and Thailand. Mary and these early Sisters, together with other Religious Orders and Lay Teachers of the time, had a profound influence on the forming of Catholic Education as we have come to know and experience it today. She also opened Orphanages, Providences to care for the homeless and destitute both young and old, and Refuges for ex prisoners and ex prostitutes who wished to make a fresh start in life. Throughout her life, Mary met with opposition from people outside the Church and even from some of those within it. In the most difficult of times she consistently refused to attack those who wrongly accused her and undermined her work, but continued in the way she believed God was calling her and was always ready to forgive those who wronged her. Throughout her life Mary suffered ill health. She died on August 8, 1909 in the convent in Mount Street,

North Sydney where her tomb is now enshrined. This great Australian woman inspired great dedication to God's work in the then new colonies. In today's world, she stands as an example of great courage and trust in her living out of God's loving and compassionate care of those in need.

Scripture today: 1 Kings 17:8-16; Psalm 63:1-8;
Colossians 3:12-17; Matthew 6:25-34

I am telling you not to worry about your life and what you are to eat, nor about your body and what you are to wear. Surely life is more than food, and the body more than clothing! Look at the birds in the sky. They do not sow or reap or gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they are? Can any of you, however much you worry, add one single cubit to your span of life? And why worry about clothing? Think of the flowers growing in the fields; they never have to work or spin: yet I assure you that not even Solomon in all his royal robes was clothed like one of these. Now if

that is how God clothes the wild flowers growing in the field which are there today and thrown into the furnace tomorrow, will he not much more look after you, you have so little faith? So do not worry; do not say, "What are we to eat? What are we to drink? What are we to wear?." It is the gentiles who set their hearts on all these things. Your heavenly Father knows you need them all. Set your hearts on his kingdom first, and on God's saving justice, and all these other things will be given you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow: tomorrow will take care of itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. (Matthew 6: 25-34)

Trust in God Mary MacKillop (1842-1909)
commands fascination well beyond the shores of Australia. I remember attending a retreat given in Australia in about the year 1990 by Father Robert Faricy SJ, an American professor of Spirituality at the Gregorian University in Rome. Widely published, he lectured and gave retreats in various countries over the course of his career. He told those attending how impressed he had always been by the

Australian nun, Mary MacKillop — and this was some five years before her beatification by Pope John Paul II. It is not difficult to put one's finger on the reasons for her appeal. She was a woman of great humanity and attractive human virtues. But of course, her singular achievement was personal sanctity. This she attained by the power of grace and her own co-operation with that grace. In one brief biography of her there is the testimony of an elderly priest who had known her when he was young . He said that she seemed always to be living in God. When the Sisters (Daughters) of our Lady of the Sacred Heart (founded by the French priest Father Jules Chevalier in 1874) arrived in Australia in 1885, they soon heard of Mother Mary MacKillop, the co-foundress of the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart. What they heard was that she was a living saint — and Mary was but in her mid-forties then. Plainly, she was a remarkable personality in the realm of personal religion. Now, at the beginning of her consecrated religious life during her 26th year, she took the name of Mary of the Cross. She had, well before this,

perceived that the acceptance of suffering, as the will of God in union with the Cross of Jesus Christ, was absolutely essential to the Christian way. This was a great insight, a leap in Christian understanding, which had come to her early — not least due to the mentoring accorded her by her remarkable co-founder, Father Julian Tennison Woods. The gift of the Holy Spirit at her Baptism had produced in her this fruit of understanding. Some people never understand this properly, and it is a gift of grace which has, though, to be accepted and embraced. St Paul writes of our sharing in the sufferings of Christ (2 Corinthians 1:5), as does St Peter (1 Peter 4:13). Both these reflect our Lord's solemn directive, that if anyone wishes to be his disciple, he must deny himself and take up his Cross every day, and follow in our Lord's footsteps (Matthew 16:24).

That was Mary MacKillop's insight and resolve. She was granted something of a premonition that her calling was to share in the Cross of Jesus Christ. The train of sufferings that ensued — injustices (such as her extraordinary, temporary, and invalid excommunication),

misunderstandings, slanders, at times at the hands of good and well-meaning persons — is a long one. She also had a fair share of physical pain and reversals. What is notable was her response: she was uncomplaining, even-tempered, magnanimous and approachable. On her tomb at North Sydney is emblazoned the simple statement: *Trust in God*. It is this which enables the Christian to pass through the fire of suffering, being progressively denied what human nature holds dear. In our Gospel today (Matthew 6: 25 34), our Lord points to the way a person is delivered from the natural attachment to the things of this life and helped to forge a powerful, indomitable attachment to the will of God. *“Think of the flowers growing in the fields; they never have to work or spin: yet I assure you that not even Solomon in all his royal robes was clothed like one of these. Now if that is how God clothes the wild flowers growing in the field which are there today and thrown into the furnace tomorrow, will he not much more look after you, you who have so little faith? So do not worry”*. God will look after us. Come rack, come rope, come whatever

it might be in life, all is in the hands of God our loving Father. Set your heart on God's will, trust, and all will be well: "*Set your hearts on his kingdom first, and on God's saving justice, and all these other things will be given you as well.*" Towards the end of Mary MacKillop's life, her brother Donald — a Jesuit priest — commented on her life: it was a life planted and steeped in the Cross. But it was the embrace of this in a wondrously prudent manner which sanctified this great-souled woman. And so it has been with the saints. Away in England and presumably known to her, was a more famous man, much older than she. I refer to St John Henry Newman — his path was notably one of the Cross. It led him to sanctity, recognized by Pope Benedict XVI when in September 2010 he beatified the great thinker, writer and divine. Then in October 2019 he was canonized in Rome by Pope Francis. It is the Cross that we ought especially notice in the story of sanctity.

Let us take to heart our Lord's powerful though simple words in today's Gospel. St Ignatius Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises* lays down the foundation of Christian

sanctity in his first Meditation, the “Principle and Foundation.” Man is made to love and serve God his Creator. So he must become detached from all created things and turn them to account for the attainment of his goal in life, which is the fullest love for God possible to him. That detachment comes by means of what, in God’s sight, is a gift: a real share in the Cross of Jesus Christ. Let us pray for that gift, and for the readiness to accept it.



Feast of St Lawrence, deacon and martyr (August 10)

Entrance Antiphon This is the blessed Lawrence, who gave himself up for the treasure of the Church: for this he earned the suffering of martyrdom to ascend with joy to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Collect O God, giver of that ardour of love for you by which Saint Lawrence was outstandingly faithful in service and glorious in martyrdom, grant that we may love what he loved and put into practice what he taught. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

St Lawrence: (3rd century) Roman deacon, he died four days after Pope Sixtus II, during the persecution of Valerian. Arrested by the prefect and called on to deliver up the property of the Church, his answer was to point to a crowd of poor people. “Here are the treasures of the Church,” he said. He was roasted to death on a gridiron.

Scripture today: 2 Corinthians 9:6-10; Psalm 112:1-2, 5-9;
John 12:24-26

Jesus said to his disciples: "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be. The Father will honour whoever serves me." (John 12:24-26)

Love Nature films have always had a wide popularity. The breathtaking beauty of nature is a source of unending filming and included in this are documentaries of the animal kingdom. There are two aspects of the life of animals which never cease to mesmerize the viewing public. Firstly, there is the preying of one animal on another or of one herd on another, in order to gain sustenance. I remember watching a film of a couple of lions struggling with a crocodile over a young, living

buffalo. The crocodile was attempting to pull the buffalo to itself into the river, while the lions were trying to pull it to themselves on to the shore. Each saw the young buffalo as prey. The lions won the tussle, but the young buffalo calf was rescued by the intervention of its own buffalo herd from which it had been taken by the attack of the lions. All across the world, from one species and genus of living thing to another, we notice that one living thing serves as prey and sustenance for another. What is the meaning of this? I prefer to look on it as a dim reflection of a pattern which is seen in the highest rank of living things in the universe, which is man. Man is called to spend himself, give himself, surrender himself, even die, for another. We call this love. The function of serving as prey in the animal kingdom in which one thing is (unthinkingly and helplessly) given up for the sake of another is a dim reflection of the higher law of *self-sacrificial love*. But there is a second feature of the animal kingdom, apart from this law of being prey, which also fascinates the observer. It is the remarkable *care* exercised by the animal parent for

its offspring. While this, too, is the fruit of mere instinct, it is most impressive to see the extraordinary lengths to which the animal parent cares for its young. What is the meaning of this? It is even more obviously a reflection of the higher law that is manifest in the crown of visible things, which is man. Man can and does *love*. His love for the other leads him to *care* for, to spend himself for, and even to sacrifice himself completely in care for the other, especially for those who depend on him. He can lay down his life for the other. Further, man sees that his truest *fulfilment* lies in this direction of self-sacrificing love.

The law of love, I suggest, is the deepest law of the universe, and it is reflected in various degrees of clarity among the orders of being making up our world. The grandest thing in the world is human love at its self-sacrificing best — and this, of course, reveals the law of the universe more clearly than any other phenomenon. I would make this further observation. This key to the universe that is love is not normally known by unaided human reflection. I suspect that by merely gazing at the

world we would find ourselves fastening on what is not loving — rather, what is evil and all that leads to mere suffering. We would be struck by the problem of evil. We would miss the beautiful thing that is really central in creation, which is the law or pattern of love. What provides us with the key to everything is God's revelation of himself above all in the person of Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, his only-begotten Son, we have come to learn that God is love, and all he does is done for love. Creation is the work of a God of love, of One who lovingly spends himself to restore his creation to its intended life of love. *In this light* we can see everywhere in creation the imprint of love, the yearning for love, the striving to be loving, and the fulfilment that is attained in love. Jesus Christ is not only the revelation of God to man, the revelation of a God of love. He is also the revelation to man of man himself, what it is to be truly human. Jesus Christ is the pinnacle which reveals the calling of all creation, most especially man who is its crown, to self-sacrificing love. He reveals it, and he enables it — by drawing all to himself. It is by

means of union with him that we are enabled by the gift of his grace to be self-sacrificing in love. By means of union with Jesus Christ in love, man is able to give himself most fully in love. Christ is the model of what it is to be human at its very best. All of this brings us to our Gospel today, selected by the Church for the Feast of St Lawrence the martyr and deacon. St Lawrence, living by the grace of Christ, gave himself totally for Christ and his Church. He is a model of self-sacrificing love because he was truly united to Jesus Christ. The greatest manifestation of the love of God, and of the love imprinted on creation, is Christ and his truest disciples — those, in other words, who live by his life of self-sacrificing love.

Let us be convinced that the true path to human fulfilment is that of union with Jesus Christ. This path is the path of self-sacrificing love, and to death if necessary. Christ is the pre-eminent martyr, the witness to the truth of God and of what God is like. We are all called to be “martyrs” in union with him — witnesses by our lives to the truth of God who is self-sacrificing love. St Lawrence

the deacon and martyr is an instance of this. As our Lord says, *“Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be.”* (John 12:24-26)

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Second reflection: (John 12:24-26)

“Anyone who hates his life in this world will keep it for the eternal life”

Today we think of St Lawrence who gave his life for Christ in a horrific death by roasting on a gridiron. In thinking of such heroism, we think, firstly, of his love for the Church, the bride of Christ. He was ordered to give up the Church’s property to the state, and to abjure his allegiance to Christ and the Church. He refused, of course. His sufferings proved his love for the Church. This demonstrated the typical Christian reverence and love for

the Church. This in turn bears witness to Christ's own love for the Church. Suffering and the cross tested and manifested his love. And then, Lawrence's martyrdom manifested the fortitude of the Christian life. What strength Lawrence displayed, what strength of spirit! This fortitude was not simply the fortitude of a strong and heroic nature. It was a share in the fortitude of Christ himself, a heavenly gift and endowment of the Holy Spirit. It was the same Spirit, at work in Christ as he offered himself up on the Cross, who was at work in St Lawrence. He, the divine Spirit, gave to Lawrence the strength to bear witness in his suffering.

The word "martyr" is a Greek word — it means a witness. Let us pray fervently to be united to Christ in good times and in bad, so that in our sufferings we too may bear witness to the living Jesus, right to the end.



The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary — Vigil Mass

Entrance Antiphon Glorious things are spoken of you, O Mary, who today were exalted above the choirs of Angels into eternal triumph with Christ.

Collect O God, who, looking on the lowliness of the Blessed Virgin Mary, raised her to this grace, that your Only Begotten Son was born of her according to the flesh and that she was crowned this day with surpassing glory, grant through her prayers, that, saved by the mystery of your redemption, we may merit to be exalted by you on high. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: 1 Chronicles 15:3-4.15-16;16:1-2;
Psalm 131; 1 Corinthians 15:34-37; Luke 11:27-28

As Jesus was saying these things, a woman in the crowd called out, Blessed is the mother who gave you birth

and nursed you. He replied, Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it. (Luke 11:27-28)

Mary We know from Scripture and the teaching of the Church that the first man and woman came into existence without the moral fault-lines that afflict mankind. Some who do not know or accept the doctrine of Original Sin may think that this is still the condition of every person who comes into the world. That is to say that the only factor in man's moral failures is his personal decision. But of course, this is not the case. Due to the Original Sin of our first parents upon which they lost their life of grace, each member of the human race comes into existence profoundly weakened by this depravation in a moral and spiritual sense. He is not totally depraved, but seriously wounded and of himself alone he cannot resist the ultimate power of sin. But this is not how God created man in the beginning. When God created man, *"in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them ... And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good"* (Genesis 1: 27-31). As I

said, the first man and the first woman were created in grace and in full inner integrity and moral harmony. There was no natural battle against inner urgings towards lust, pride, sloth and other tendencies towards making Self the centre of all. They still had to resist temptation, though — from whatever external source it might come. It was not long coming, for the Serpent appeared with his insinuating proposal: you can be like God, knowing good and evil (meaning perhaps, deciding for yourself what is good and evil). The woman was intrigued by it. It looked good — indeed, it delighted her, so “*she took of its fruit and ate; and she gave some to her husband and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened*” (Genesis 3:6). They had freely disobeyed God and all was now amiss. They were filled with shame and hid from God as persons separated from him. The one thing necessary for them to do — not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the tree which was in the midst of the garden (i.e., affecting all of human action) — this they had not done. They had followed the Serpent and not their Creator who had given

them life in their beautiful Garden. So they were cast out and denied access to the tree of life (Genesis 3:24). This is the lot into which we are born.

In the fullness of time, a new Eve was given to the world. In view of the saving work of her divine Son she was preserved from any touch of the Original Sin of our first parents from the first moment of her existence. In a way not unlike Eve her original ancestor (but in a way that surpassed her), Mary came into the world full of grace and with full moral integrity: it was a privilege granted to her in anticipation of the merits of her Son the Saviour and in view of her exalted mission of being the Mother of God incarnate. She did not merit it, just as Eve did not merit her own spiritual and moral endowments on coming into the world. But unlike Eve, Mary the new Eve did not succumb to temptation. When the Angel came to her to announce God's plan to her, he addressed her as one *full of grace*, and that the Lord was with her. She had never sinned and never would sin, and she flowered stupendously in grace. This is a phenomenon so much outside our

experience that it is difficult to imagine and appreciate, except that it is manifest from the Gospel accounts that this moral excellence was combined with what we might call the ordinariness of the typical human condition. Her life was humble and ordinary, but all the while there was in her a glory of grace beyond human compare. Mary never succumbed to temptation to sin. This itself was the work of grace, but it received her full and active co-operation. In other words, Mary the humble and obscure mother of Jesus was a titan of moral vigilance, of moral strength, and of moral achievement. The achievement did not consist in winning temporal kingdoms, but in attaining an incomparable communion with God. In her, the love of God reigned supreme and ever advanced. All this was the work of God and his grace, but she unfailingly co-operated with this divine action within her, and so she merited the highest praise. She is the glory of the Church of which she is mother and a member, and she is the shining jewel of our race. As Dante wrote: *“Maiden yet a mother, high beyond all other – lowlier is none; when our lost creation nobler*

rose in thee!” She, entirely a creature, and nothing more than a human person (for her Son was a divine Person), was the sinless one. All this brings us to our Gospel today, in which our Lord says, “*Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it*” (Luke 11: 27-28).

Our Lady was not assumed into heaven body and soul at the end of her mortal life simply because she was the mother of God incarnate. Blessed as she was because of this, she was blessed even more because she was free of sin and entirely faithful to the word and the will of God. Sin never so much as touched her, so death could not prevail over her. Let us take her into our home, the home of our hearts, asking her that she will care for us as she cared for her divine Son. It was on the Cross that Jesus gave her to us: *Behold your mother*, he said to the beloved disciple, and he says this to each of us. *Holy Mary, mother of God! Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death!*



Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary **(August 15)**

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Rev 12: 1 A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon beneath her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.

Or:

Let us all rejoice in the Lord, as we celebrate the feast day in honour of the Virgin Mary, at whose Assumption the Angels rejoice and praise the Son of God.

Collect Almighty ever living God, who assumed the Immaculate Virgin Mary, the Mother of your Son, body and soul into heavenly glory, grant, we pray, that, always attentive to the things that are above, we may merit to be sharers of her glory. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

The Assumption of the Virgin Mary This feast of the Assumption was celebrated in the liturgy of the Eastern

World from the sixth century. On November 1, 1950 Pope Pius XII defined the dogma of the Assumption. He solemnly proclaimed that the belief whereby the Blessed Virgin Mary, at the close of her earthly career, was taken up body and soul into the glory of heaven, really forms part of the deposit of faith, received from the apostles. This feast confirms us in the theological virtue of hope whereby we seek our sanctification and that of the others in the mists of our ordinary duties. At the same time we are encouraged to look towards our goal in heaven.

Scripture today: Apocalypse 11:19, 12: 1-6.10; Psalm 44;
1 Corinthians 15:20-27; Luke 1:39-56

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favoured, that

the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished! And Mary said: My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me- holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants for ever, even as he said to our fathers. Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home. (Luke 1:39-56)

Glory ahead

One of the intriguing questions about the history and nature of man concerns what it is that nourishes the religious instinct. What is it in man that constitutes the *natural spring* of his religion? — and religion is virtually universal. There is no single answer to this — as the study of religions and anthropology show. But we can surely propose that the very transitoriness of life and the promptings of a man's conscience are obvious factors. That is to say, the realization that life is passing and will end, that it is transitory and utterly contingent, together with the thought which his guilty conscience has of a future judgment, will prompt many to turn to God — however he may be imagined. Every moment that comes, in an instant is gone. That moment that has come and which is now gone has taken the individual nearer his end. Life passes, and passes quickly. It is ever rushing on, so silently, so imperceptibly, so truly. It cannot be stopped, it cannot pause, it cannot proceed more slowly. In fact, it can come to a sudden end, like a car that without warning passes over the edge and into the chasm. Life is essentially

transitory. It is ultimately unpredictable and contingent. In view of this passing character of life, it is natural for man to think of the future. So, if he is wise he will ponder on his end. He can think of it even when he is quite young — say, in his mid-teens. Looking ahead, the teenager can allow the coming stages of life to pass before his mind's eye. He will be going to university, embarking on a career, getting married and raising his family, passing middle age and on to say, the age of seventy or so. He asks himself, if I happen to live that long, what will happen *then*? What will my life have to show for itself? I sense the judgment of my conscience now — I will surely sense it *then*. Indeed, he ruminates, I can sense a Judgment that is to come. There will be a Reckoning. Indeed, there is a Reckoning even now. So he might turn to God and begin to live in his presence. These are sobering and perhaps fearful thoughts, and can give to natural religion a gloomy and anxious character. If all we had to go on was natural reflection on what we see or sense, we might have much to fear in facing

the transitoriness of life, the fact of sin and the broken character of life.

But a great light and a beautiful melody has come from all that God has revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. We can now be *hopeful*. The broken character of life, it has been divinely revealed, is due to sin — but a Redeemer has come and we can place our hopes in him. It is revealed that if we are faithful to him we have the future prospect of glory in body and soul. Our Redeemer has gone ahead of us. Further, in the person of his own sinless mother, he has provided a lustrous exemplar of all that lies ahead. She reigns as the Queen Mother in heaven, glorious in body and soul — and all because of the work of her incomparable Son. The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, our mother and model in faith, illustrates a consoling prospect ahead for the Church's children. Our Lady, the Church has solemnly defined, was taken by God body and soul into heaven at the end of her life, full of glory. This is because no sin touched her soul at any instant from the first moment of her conception to her last breath on this earth.

It is sin that brought death to man, the Original Sin of our first parents, and our own personal sins. By a singular grace, Mary was preserved from all sin and she co-operated with this grace. She did not sin, and so death could not hold her. She was assumed body and soul in glory, following in the glorious train of her divine Son. Mary, the mother of God made man, does not await a future bodily glory, as do other holy souls who have attained the glory and bliss of heaven. She already possesses it. Those who are saved — those canonized by the Church, and those not canonized, enjoy the bliss of God in their spirits, and will regain a glorious bodily condition at the end, following the Final Judgment. But Mary's final state in body and soul is already attained. She already enjoys it as does, in a far more exalted sense of course, her divine Son. He is divine, she is entirely human. By his passion, death and resurrection, Christ in his risen bodily humanity re-entered the glory that had been his as God the Son from all eternity. She, our entirely human mother, attained her glory by fully cooperating during her human life with the

graces won for her by her divine Son. She shows us the way we must follow, and the end that awaits us if we are faithful.

If we cooperate daily and generously with the grace coming to us from the redeeming work of Jesus, we too will receive glory in *body and soul*. This *bodily* glory will not come at the end of our lives as it did with Mary our mother, but at the end of human history at the General Judgment of mankind. In the meantime we must strive for holiness while life is granted to us. Let us keep our eyes on our glorious Mother Mary, asking her to help us to be faithful to God's will here on earth so as to share in his glory for ever in heaven. This prospect of future glory should give us undying hope.



Feast of St Bartholomew (August 24)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 96 (95):2-3 Proclaim the salvation of God day by day; tell among the nations his glory.

Collect Strengthen in us, O Lord, the faith, by which the blessed Apostle Bartholomew clung wholeheartedly to your Son, and grant that through the help of his prayers your Church may become for all the nations the sacrament of salvation. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

St Bartholomew, Apostle He was from Cana in Galilee. Mentioned in the Gospel as one of the Twelve, he is identified with Nathanael who was brought to Jesus by his friend, the Apostle Philip. According to tradition, St Bartholomew preached the Gospel in Arabia and Armenia where he was martyred.

Scripture today:

Revelation 21:9b-14;

Psalms 145:10-13, 17-18; John 1:45-51

Philip found Nathanael and told him, We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote- Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. Nazareth! Can anything good come from there? Nathanael asked. Come and see, said Philip. When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false. How do you know me? Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you. Then Nathanael declared, Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel. Jesus said, You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that. He then added, I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man. (John 1:45-51)

God encourages If there is one thing which a familiarity with the lives of the saints brings home, it is how different one from another they are. Compare, say, two virtual contemporaries — St John Vianney (1786-1859) the French parish priest, and St John Henry Newman (1801-1890) the famed English intellectual and writer. Both became known internationally, but for different reasons. People came from distant places to consult the holy Cure of Ars as early as 1827, over thirty years before his death. By 1855, the number of pilgrims had reached twenty thousand a year, above all to go to Confession to him. During the last ten years of his life, he spent sixteen to eighteen hours a day in the confessional. Fifteen years after he died, Pope Pius IX (himself destined to be beatified) declared him Venerable — and in his old age, Cardinal Newman used to have his biography read to him. The two never met, but I am sure they had heard of one another. Newman's bishop (Ullathorne) visited the Cure of Ars and doubtless spoke of him to Newman — and in any case the Cure of Ars had a European reputation for

holiness. St John Vianney for his part was aware of the second spring in England and of the new converts. When Newman went to Rome at the end of 1846, he was well known among European Catholic circles. He, Newman, was known to the Pope himself before he got there. How different the two were! Newman had gained a national reputation in England by the mid-1830s as a religious thinker and writer, and this continued unabated till his death. He was the champion of the Conscience, the true Church, and of dogmatic truth. I mention these two saints merely to make the point I introduced: that the saints are so very different in personality and path. But there is one thing they have in common — their hearts are more and more filled with love, even if the way this love is shown varies enormously. This Christian love, directed in the first place to God, is directed also to neighbour — and those who encounter the saints know their love. Now, there is a special feature of Christian love which I would like to highlight because it appears in our Gospel passage today (John 1:45-51). The love of the Christian saint is

supportive and encouraging. It affirms goodness, and it encourages greater goodness.

Let me illustrate this by referring to another saint, one of the century following that of Vianney and Newman. There are many documentary films of the Spanish priest, St Josemaria Escriva (1902-1975), addressing crowds of people in various countries. At the end of his addresses he would invite questions from the audience, and what is notable in these documentaries is how very *encouraging* he appears to everyone. He is shown brimful of warmth and optimism, and he unstintingly *praised* people who spoke to him or asked a question. He openly recognized the good in people and praised them. I think that anyone who was sincere, having met Escriva, would come away feeling profoundly *encouraged*. This was one feature of the Christian love at work in this particular saint, and I am sure that it would be present (in different forms and degrees) in every saint. Now, let us notice in our Gospel today that when Nathanael is brought to our Lord, our Lord readily gives him the highest praise. “*Nazareth! Can anything*

good come from there? Nathanael asked. Come and see, said Philip. When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.” John, the author of this Gospel, always remembered the first words of Jesus Christ about and to Nathanael. They were full of *praise*. But this was not the only time Christ praised people. When the message from the centurion — presumably a pagan — came to our Lord asking his help, and subsequently telling him that he trusted his power completely, our Lord turned in admiration to the crowds and told them that he had never come across faith like that of the centurion. Our Lord gave him the highest *praise*. He referred to John the Baptist as being the greatest among those born of women. When Simon told our Lord that he was the Christ, the Son of the Living God, our Lord said to him: “*Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven.*” Our Lord was praising Simon for his faith and for being subject to the special light coming from the Father. For the one who is

sincere and trying to serve God, our Lord's love shows itself as encouraging.

When we turn to Jesus Christ in prayer, let us approach him as Nathanael did in our Gospel today. Nathanael came just as he was, in simplicity. He was warmly welcomed by our Lord, and praised for his moral qualities — he was genuine and guileless. Christ's love for him manifested itself in terms that were very encouraging. Christ will show his love for the one who comes to him in prayer, and he will be very encouraging. We truly shall find the support we need by seeking God consistently in daily prayer. God is encouraging, not discouraging. We discourage ourselves and perhaps others do also, but God does not discourage us. Let us trust him, then!

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Second reflection: (John 1: 45-51)

Nathanael answered, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel.' It is very notable

how quickly the first Apostles responded to our Lord. In a very short time Philip attained faith in Jesus. He said to Nathanael, “*We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, the one about whom the prophets wrote: he is Jesus the son of Joseph, from Nazareth.*” What was it about Philip that enabled him to come to this conclusion so quickly? We are not told. But let us turn to the case of Nathanael (Bartholomew), to whom Philip said this. Nathanael does not seem to have expected Jesus to be the Messiah — for, to begin with, Jesus came from Nazareth! There must have been something about the people of Nazareth for it not to have sounded promising. “*Can anything good come from that place?*” he replied to Philip. But Philip had given his clear witness, and so Nathanael came to see. Nathanael must have been awaiting the Messiah — for he responded to Philip’s invitation to “*come and see.*” Consider, though, what happened then. Our Lord simply said to him “*I saw you under the fig tree*” and Nathanael answered, “*Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel.*” He immediately attained faith in

our Lord — the Christian faith the author of the Gospel wished to evoke in his reader (cf. Chap.21). How do we account for Nathanael's rapid insight into our Lord's identity? We are given a clue in our Lord's words about Nathanael: "*There is an Israelite who deserves the name, incapable of deceit.*" That is to say, he was entirely open to the truth, and committed to it. As a result he had a full readiness for the one who was the Truth when he presented himself before him.

Nathanael's *disposition* was fully open to the Truth coming from God. He was good soil, capable of responding immediately to the seed planted in his heart: he heard the word and understood. Let us pray for the dispositions God wishes to see in us, the right starting points. Let us pray to be good soil for the seed coming from God to bear fruit.



The Martyrdom of St John the Baptist (August 29)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 119 (118):46-47 I spoke, O Lord, of your decrees before kings, and was not confounded; I pondered your commands and loved them greatly.

Collect O God, who willed that Saint John the Baptist should go ahead of your Son both in his birth and in his death, grant that, as he died a Martyr for truth and justice, we, too, may fight hard for the confession of what you teach. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

The Martyrdom of St John the Baptist. St John's fearless condemnation of Herod's unlawful marriage incurred the hatred of the king's bride, Herodias. She had him imprisoned and finally killed. St John the Baptist teaches us to be strong in carrying out the work God has given us.

Scripture today: Jeremiah 1:17-19; Psalm 70;

Mark 6:17-29

Herod gave orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. For John had been saying to Herod, It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife. So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him. Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the girl, Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you. And he promised her with an oath, Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom. She went out and said to her mother, What shall I ask for? The head of John the Baptist,

she answered. At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter. The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb. (Mark 6:17-29)

Stand ready There was no warning, and it was all over within minutes. John, the greatest of all the prophets, he of whom our Lord had said that there was no one born of woman greater than he, had been held in prison. Incidentally, where was he held? We are not told — it could have been at the Galilean capital, Tiberius, or, according to the more common opinion because of Josephus' testimony (*Bellum* VII.6.1-2), at the fortress of Machaerus on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea. In any case, Herod Antipas invited the leading men there for a

birthday celebration. Consider the day, from Herod's point of view. It was a big day for him personally: it was his birthday. Sensuous, self-centred, superstitious, enjoying anything helping his popularity, a decadent minor prince who had had a notoriously cruel, scheming yet competent father ("the Great") — it was his birthday. We read in Mark's account that a grand banquet was organized for the occasion, to which his principal courtiers, his chief captains and the first men in Galilee were invited. Think of such people! Consider them as individuals, each with his history behind him, each concerned with his career, his money, his power and his display. In they came, talking, laughing, and the music and merriment surged on with the sumptuous food being brought in to the tables. Herod was in his element — it was his big day in the year. Little was he expecting any special turn of events. Away in the dungeon, below perhaps, was the holiest of all the prophets to that point, with the exception of the Messiah himself who outclassed them all. There John sat, perhaps in the gloom, absorbed in prayer. Nothing especial was expected

that day, either on the part of Herod Antipas, or his worldly and self-indulgent guests, or of John. They knew that John, the prophet of Judea who had either come to confront Herod over his marriage with Herodias, or had publicly decried it, was held below — but that was Herod's business. Herodias! Ah! She did not expect anything this day either — though we do not really know. Perhaps she had planned the incident. In any case, let us imagine that she had a hand in the preparation of the birthday banquet. All the while she was consumed with hatred for the impudent, the impossible, the arrogant, the inflexible so-called prophet from the Jordan River who seemed to cast a spell over her morally decrepit yet superstitious husband. What mattered to Herodias was Antipas's position and wealth. She could not break John's subtle hold on her new husband's imagination — he was fascinated by John's moral stature, and from time to time would listen to him. Herodias hated, absolutely hated this prophet. He shook her position in the eyes of Herod, and

perhaps beyond. But still, there is no evidence that anything special was expected that day.

We read in the Gospel text that “a suitable day” came — we might translate it as “an opportunity.” The Evangelist, looking back on that day, saw it as “an opportunity” for something terrible. But it was not expected — all that was expected was a good time with the birthday feast at which all the first people of Galilee were present. All were in their places, and on came a special feature that was the daughter of Herodias, Herod’s new wife. She was spectacular. She dazzled the room, and bewitched them all, not least the man himself — Herod. We can imagine him, befuddled with his cups, fired with the young beauty before him, seized by the delight of the room, and shouting out his praises of the girl. He scarcely knew what he was saying, and he forthwith offered her whatever she desired. It was a display of machismo, and all of a piece with his hopeless moral condition. A couple of years later Jesus Christ stood before him and refused to speak to him. *Ask of me whatever you wish*, he bawled out

at the empty-headed girl, swimming in her vanity, *and I will give it to you*. Excitement reigned in the room as all the notables watched the spectacle, in interest and merriment. A pause. Herod, emboldened, repeated his offer, his dripping if unsteady cup held aloft. No-one suspected what was soon to happen, neither Herod, nor his guests, nor the girl, nor her mother — none of the protagonists of the day. Nothing was expected. So the girl, with no ideas in her head, asked a minute's leave and sauntered out to her mother who may have been nearby overseeing the smooth-running of the party. I have been offered anything I may ask, the girl said to her — what shall it be? Herodias was not expecting this, nor had her daughter, but like a cat who sees the mouse, she sprang for her prey. The head of John! His head! she replied. The girl looked, understood, nodded, and without a moment's hesitation, returned to the presence of her foster-father. The room was full of expectation — what surprise was it to be? No-one expected what came. The announcement was made and carried across the hall — and Herod was left

speechless. He did not expect this. No-one expected it. The guards did not expect it. Nor did John expect it. But within minutes it was all over, one of the worst deeds of human history. Because of it, this celebration of Herod's birthday will never be forgotten in human history.

Many lessons can be drawn from this and other Gospel events. One is that we must stand ready for any circumstance in the sense that whatever comes, it is God's will that we must be disposed to do. We must be vigilant against temptation. This requires a state of detachment from self and its appetites. Herod was caught in the web of his appetites, and he *consented* to being the instrument and perpetrator of a great evil. We must always stand ready for whatever God may will, and we must, day by day, be so disposed and morally equipped to detect temptation, and quick to repel it. Let the martyrdom of John the Baptist be a constant example of how easy it is to fall when temptation comes. No-one might be expecting it, but the terrible harm is done, and sin thus reigns.

Second reflection: (Mark 6:17-29)

“As for Herodias, she was furious with him and wanted to kill him.”

Herodias was filled with fury when John the Baptist told Herod that he had contravened the law of Moses — and so had sinned grievously — in marrying his brother’s wife. Undoubtedly Satan, himself furious at John unmasking Herod’s sin, was hard at work on Herodias too. Satan would also have seen his opportunity to put an end to John, the precursor of the Messiah. A similar pattern recurred in the life of our Lord. The Scribes and Pharisees became filled with fury against our Lord, and conspired to put an end to him because of his pointing out their sins. That Satan used this growing opposition to our Lord is evident from the fact that St John in his Gospel tells us that when just before Judas left the Last Supper to betray our

Lord, Satan entered him. Sin hates the light, and this hatred is shown in sinful anger against it. If we allow sin into our life, we too will hate the light. To that extent we will hate the person and word of Jesus also. There is this too: just as Herodias in her anger led her daughter into collaborating in a monstrous sin, so too might we. The more sin gains an entry into our hearts, the more likely it is that others who are influenced by us will be led into sin.

Let us make our choice for Christ and renounce sin — not just once but daily, and let us bring the whole of our life into accord with this choice.



The Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary (September 8)

Entrance Antiphon Let us celebrate with joy the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, for from her arose the sun of justice, Christ our God.

Collect Impart to your servants, we pray, O Lord, the gift of heavenly grace, that the feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin may bring deeper peace to those for whom the birth of her Son was the dawning of salvation. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

The birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary: The Church has celebrated Mary's birth since at least the sixth century. A September birth was chosen because the Eastern Church begins its Church year with September.

Scripture today: Micah 5:1-4 or Romans 8:28-30;
Psalm 12; Matthew 1:1-16.18-23

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel- which means, God with us. (Matthew 1:18-23)

Mary One of the very notable things about the greatness of the biblical figure of the mother of Jesus Christ is that it is possible, for various reasons, to miss it. St Matthew presents Mary as being the one of whom

“Jesus who is called the Messiah was born” (1:16). She conceived him by the power of *“the Holy Spirit”* (1:20). Her glory is to have been the mother of the Saviour and to have been perfectly faithful to grace and the will of God. In the Gospel of St Luke, the Angel Gabriel addresses her as most highly favoured by God, full of God’s grace, as one with whom the Lord abides (1:28-30). She is *“the servant of the Lord”* and obeys him perfectly (1:38). God is her Saviour and he has looked upon her in her lowliness. Her whole being proclaims God’s greatness, and the ages to come will call her blessed (1: 46-49). Apart from Jesus Christ (of course), it is the figure of Mary which Luke’s Gospel dwells on more than any other. He also includes her in his account of the infant Church (Acts 1:14). In the Gospel of St John we have two precious glimpses of the presence and person of Mary. There is the wedding feast of Cana when, at her intercession, Christ revealed his glory with the first of his “signs” (John 2:1-11). We see there the power of her intercession for us as Mother of the Lord. We see her for a second time at the foot of the Cross at

Calvary, marking the end. There she also becomes the mother of the beloved disciple, which the Church has always seen as her investiture as mother of the Church, which is to say all of Christ's faithful. Apart from the very nature of the case — her being the grace-filled mother of the Saviour — the very space given to Mary in the Gospels ought to be reason for reverent pause. At the very least, she is manifestly a most significant figure in the Gospel accounts. But as I said earlier, this can be missed. As a matter of fact, large numbers of Christians not in communion with the See of Rome have missed it. Many Catholics have missed it too, despite the Church's formal teaching and guidance. This is another instance of how we depend on the life and guidance of the Church for a full appreciation of the richness of divine revelation. Were it not for the Church which was built by Christ on the Rock that is Peter, the person of Mary could have been somewhat lost from sight, despite the abundant testimony to her, in principle and in fact, in the Gospels themselves.

The veneration of Mary grew out of the Church's adoration of her divine Son. Indirect testimonies of a cult to her during the first few centuries are extant. For instance, one of the paintings in the catacombs of St Priscilla shows the Virgin Mary with her divine Child, and what is probably a prophet by her side. This is a very authentic representation, because Mary would have been steeped in the prophets, and the prophet Isaiah foretold the virgin with her child (Isaiah 7:14). In the catacombs of St Peter and St Marcellinus, one painting shows Mary between Saints Peter and Paul — Mary is represented praying with arms outstretched. She, then, intercedes for the Church. It seems that Mary was honoured together with our Lord in the Church of the Nativity in Palestine since the era of Emperor Constantine. Mary was always situated within the context of honour and adoration accorded to Jesus Christ — she is his mother. St. Justin (died about 167 AD) writes of Mary's motherhood of Jesus, who was virginally conceived of her. Justin bases his reflections on Mary on the parallel between Mary and

Jesus on the one hand, and Eve and Adam in Genesis 3:15 on the other. This parallel served as the basis of the Marian reflections of the later Fathers of the Church, following Justin. It was also, incidentally, the preferred approach to Mary of St John Henry Newman in his *Letter Addressed to the Rev. E. B. Pusey, D.D.*, on the occasion of Pusey's *Eirenicon* (1865). In the middle of the third century, Origen applied the title of Mother of God to Mary. The prayer, "We fly to your patronage" ("Sub tuum praesidium"), containing this wondrous title, dates from this period. So it was that, in order to insist on the divinity of Christ, the doctrine that Mary is the mother of God was proclaimed as a Christian dogma by the Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D. Perhaps the most common prayer to Mary, commented on in the Church's catechisms, is the "Hail Mary." It begins with the invocations of Mary as they appear in the Gospels: "*Hail Mary! Full of grace, the Lord is with you, blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.*" Then the prayer addresses her as Mother of God and asks for her

intercession. “*Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners*”.

But all this can be missed. It is one of the most curious phenomena in Christian history, that those who profess to be lovers, servants and followers of Jesus Christ can miss the place, in revealed religion, of Mary his mother. As a matter of fact, they can be *opposed* to the veneration of Mary, regarding it as essentially a distraction from Jesus Christ and opposed to the pure doctrine on him. Let us bear in mind the magnificent testimony of the Gospels, especially, perhaps, the account by John of Christ’s dying gift of his blessed mother: “*Son, behold your mother!*” Let us accept that gift, for Mary is the Help of Christians in their love for and following of her Son.

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Second reflection: (Luke 6:27)

“I say this to you who are listening: love your enemies, do good to those who hate you” There are

many things that characterise the authentically religious man. Such a person is sincere, and he acts in a way that accords with the dictates of his conscience. He also places God at the centre of his concerns. But there is one feature that especially characterises the mind and conscience of the true Christian. That feature is *love for the man who causes him injury*. It is very notable because it appears to be quite beyond the capacity of nature and a purely natural virtue. Yet Christ lays it down as his personal command in his well known words: *“I say this to you who are listening: love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who treat you badly.”* Our Lord is asking his disciples to go beyond the norm: *“If you love those who love you, what thanks can you expect? Even sinners love those who love them.”* He asks his disciples to imitate their Father in heaven, *“for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be compassionate*

as your Father is compassionate.” Of course, this involves one’s image and notion of God. Our Lord revealed in his own Person a God who is compassionate.

Our life’s work is to love as Jesus loved us, and for this we need the grace won for us by him. It is beyond our natural capacity to love as Jesus loved — that is to say, among other things, to love our enemies. However, if by the grace of God it is practised, nature will be wonderfully fulfilled by such a life: *“a full measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over, will be poured into your lap.”* Today is the feast of the birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary. She is our mother and our model in all that pertains to the Christian life, most especially the life of Christian love. Let us think of how, standing at the foot of the cross at Calvary, she loved those who injured her Son, forgave them utterly, and joined with her Son in interceding for the redemption of the world.



The Triumph of the Cross (September 14)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Gal 6: 14 We should glory in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom is our salvation, life and resurrection, through whom we are saved and delivered.

Collect O God, who willed that your Only Begotten Son should undergo the Cross to save the human race, grant, we pray, that we, who have known his mystery on earth, may merit the grace of his redemption in heaven. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

The Victory of the Holy Cross The public veneration of the Holy Cross dates from the fourth century. Our Mother the Church sings of the triumph of the Holy Cross, the instrument of our salvation. In order to follow Christ, the Christian must take up his cross and become obedient with Christ, who was obedient until death, even death on the Cross. By entering into union with Christ on the Cross,

we become co-redeemers, sharing in Christ's Cross. "How splendid the cross of Christ! It brings life, not death; light, not darkness; Paradise, not its loss. It is the wood on which the Lord, like a great warrior, was wounded in hands and feet and side, but healed thereby our wounds. A tree has destroyed us, a tree now brought us life" (Theodore of Studios).

Scripture today: Numbers 21:4b-9; Psalm 78:1bc 2, 34-38;
Philippians 2:6-11; John 3:13-17

Jesus said to Nicodemus, No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven- the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:13-17)

The Cross

It is generally agreed that suffer we must, and many writers have suggested a nonchalant and stoic approach to it. I have read somewhere that Marcus T. Cicero said, *“All pain is either severe or slight, if slight, it is easily endured; if severe, it will without doubt be brief (i.e., because one will die).”* Aristotle famously wrote that *“Suffering becomes beautiful when anyone bears great calamities with cheerfulness, not through insensibility but through greatness of mind.”* There is indeed a beauty about a person who can suffer “with cheerfulness.” But the question remains, *Why must we suffer anyway?* Let us set aside that question for it may be unanswerable, or at least unprofitable in practical terms. If our question is, *Can it be useful or valuable?* then a variety of answers will be given — and Aristotle at least suggested that the cheerful endurance of suffering gives to the sufferer an aura of beauty. It can be suggested that “suffering” is a useful mechanism preserving health — like pain of a toothache, which alerts the sufferer to the need for medical attention. But can we get any deeper than this? Can any value be

attributed to being sick, or being maligned, or losing one's possessions, or being frustrated in one's ambitions? If due to "bad luck" or whatever other cause, one's life turns out to be a train of sufferings, what is to be made of this? What is to be made of the ultimate reversal, death itself? Can this be understood ultimately in positive terms? Imagine a conversation between Aristotle and Jesus Christ, in which Christ tells the Philosopher that he, Jesus, had to suffer much and die a terrible death in order that life might come to the world. I suspect that Aristotle would have perceived the great moral stature of the One before him, but would have thought, like Simon Peter (Matthew 16:22), that at all costs he had to be dissuaded from that course. I wonder what the Philosopher would have thought had Christ told him that the one who saves his life will lose it, and the one who loses his life "for my sake" will find it. I suspect that in his heart (as we might say), he would have raised his eyes and have shaken his head, all uncomprehending. The fact is that Jesus Christ has turned the biggest issue in human history on its head. The grand negative, which is

suffering and death, is now the grand positive — if accepted in religious obedience and in union with him.

I venture to say that this central point in the Christian religion — the positive nature of suffering — is inaccessible to the one without faith in Jesus Christ. What would Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero or any other pagan thinker have to say about St Rose of Lima's (1586-1617) account of Christ's words to her: "*The Lord, our Saviour, raised his voice and spoke with incomparable majesty. 'Let all know,' he said, 'that after sorrow grace follows; let them understand that without the burden of affliction one cannot arrive at the height of glory'...*" St Rose continues in her writings: "*No one would complain about the cross or about hardships coming seemingly by chance upon him, if he realized in what balance they are weighed before being distributed to men.*" In this Gospel-inspired piece, sufferings as permitted by God are a *blessing* because they are the path to glory. They are not tragic in ultimate terms, if accepted in obedience to God. They are the path to life unseen. This perspective is ridiculous to the wise of the

world, especially when related to admitted tragedies such as murder, mayhem, natural disasters and real calamities. But we know it, not from the testimony of reason, from experience, or from what the greatest of philosophers might perceive, but from the teaching and example of Jesus Christ, the Teacher of the world. What this shows is that *faith* is a source of a unique knowledge that is beyond the powers of observation and reason alone. It is a knowledge derived from gazing on the Person of Jesus Christ and placing one's faith in his word because of who he is: the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. He chose to suffer because it was the will of his heavenly Father. Mysteriously, suffering was the path to his glory as man, and in union with him it is the path to glory for all — Aristotle and his like, included. Christ went forward to the leaders of the nation to bear witness to the truth of his Person and teaching, and embraced the Cross that was placed on his shoulders as a result. In the divine plan, so it had to be if he was to attain the glory. The result? The Cross now glows in triumph. It is the sword and the shield,

the helmet and the chariot whereby our Champion won the field. Let each mount his steed with him, then, and proceed towards the same victory, holding aloft the same standard and using the same weapons.

As our Lord says in today's Gospel, *"the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life"* (John 3:13-17). St Paul had no doubt about this fundamental point. *"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death"* (Philippians 3:10). Again, *"If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection"* (Romans 6:5). Let us pray for the singular grace, the gift from God that can turn our lives around, of embracing the Cross in union with the Saviour, and thus powerfully contribute towards the sanctification of the world. It comes through the triumph of Christ's Cross.

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Second reflection: (Philippians 2:6-11)

“Being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross”

An essential component of any good work is that the right means be selected to attain the end of the project. If a military general hopes to attain victory he must be skilled in selecting the right means to do it. When historians examine the work of various personalities in history and consider why they achieved their goals, they can point to causes that account for certain results. But in respect to the greatest event in the history of the world, the salvation of mankind, the cause of it is beyond understanding. The cause of the redemption of man was the Passion and Death of the Messiah. Christ became man and dwelt among us especially in order to suffer and to die. He *“became as men are: and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross. But God raised him high”* (Philippians 2: 6-11). Now, why was it that Christ’s sufferings achieved the redemption of mankind?

Why did the Messiah have to suffer in order to enter into his glory, and to open up to all of us a share in that glory? We do not know — it is a mystery. But fact it is: obedience in suffering is the path to glory. Whether we understand it or not, we have in the Cross the key to salvation, sanctification and glory. The task of life is to act on this revealed truth and to embrace in obedience the Cross, in union with Christ.

It is at Mass that all that Christ won for us by his Cross is made available to us. The Mass is the Cross of Christ, the Sacrifice of Calvary, made present. At Mass we are able to be with Christ as given to the Father on our behalf, in that same act of surrender he effected at Calvary. In Holy Communion we unite ourselves with him in this self-gift of our Redeemer. Just as Calvary was the high point and greatest expression of our Lord's whole life, so Mass is the high point and greatest expression of our life and the life of the Church. Let us put everything into our Sunday — or better still, our daily — Mass. Just as Calvary was the triumph and exaltation of Christ's Cross,

so the Mass is the moment when the triumph and exaltation of Christ's Cross is made present. Let us ask God during Mass for the grace of a deep love for the Cross and an appreciation of how central it is in the Christian life.



Our Lady of Sorrows (September 15)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Lk 2:34-35 Simeon said to Mary: Behold, this child is destined for the ruin and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign of contradiction; and your own soul a sword will pierce.

Collect O God, who willed that, when your Son was lifted high on the Cross, his Mother should stand close by and share his suffering, grant that your Church, participating with the Virgin Mary in the Passion of Christ, may merit a share in his Resurrection. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Our Lady of Sorrows This feast has its origin in that Christian devotion which associates her with the Passion of her Son. Pope Pius VII extended this devotion to the whole Church and, in 1912, St Pius X fixed the feast on this day, within the octave of the Nativity of our Mother the Virgin. Our Mother the Virgin Mary teaches us to live, together with her, beside the Cross of her Son. In her

suffering as co-redeemer, she reminds us of the tremendous malice of sin and shows us the way of true repentance. For a while there were two feasts in honour of the Sorrowful Mother: one going back to the 15th century, the other to the 17th century. For a while both were celebrated by the universal Church: one on the Friday before Palm Sunday, the other in September. The principal biblical references to Mary's sorrows are in Luke 2:35 and John 19:26-27.

Scripture today: Hebrews 5:7-9; Psalm 30;

John 19:25-27 or Luke 2:33-35

Jesus' father and mother were amazed at what was said about him; and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted and you yourself a sword will pierce so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." (Luke 2:33-35)

Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary

Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved he said to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Behold, your mother.” And from that hour the disciple took her into his home. (John 19:25-27)

Mary The first of our two possible Gospel passages today is from St Luke. We could say that, in view of the wealth of references to Mary in Luke, it is in the portrayal of her in his *Gospel* and in *The Acts* that the believer’s contemplation of Mary is given its essential framework. There are nine episodes in which Luke presents Mary, most of them being part of his infancy narrative. There is the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38), Mary’s visit to Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-45), the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:1-7) and intervention of the Angels and the Shepherds (Luke 2:8-20, the naming of Jesus and his presentation in the Temple (Luke 2:21-40), the boy Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:41-52), Christ’s words about his true relatives (Luke 8:19-21) and on true blessedness (Luke 11:27-28), and finally there is Mary’s presence in the life

of the infant Church (Acts 1:12-14). No other disciple of Christ receives such space in his Gospel, though it is discretely done. Though there are references to Mary in both Matthew and Mark, they do not match Luke's range — nor even in John himself, into whose hands Christ entrusted his blessed mother. One may divine that Luke had a special love for Mary the mother of the Lord (as had Matthew, Mark and John, of course), and as Paul's companion we may presume that Paul did too. Doubtless Mary was the principal source of Luke's infancy account, and a great deal could be said about Mary by prayerfully contemplating his presentations of her. But our interest here is one aspect of her life, albeit a principal one: her union with her Son *in his sufferings*. The sufferings of the Messiah were a principal path whereby he gained the victory of man's redemption. He had to suffer in order to enter his glory, a glory for us too. Moreover, Christ made it abundantly clear that his disciples must take up their cross with him if they were to be his disciples. Luke makes it clear that this was certainly the case with Christ's

own mother. Led by the Spirit, Simeon had prophesied that “*a sword will go through the soul*” of “*Mary his mother*” (Luke 2: 34-35). This was because the child would be “*a sign*” that is “*spoken against*.”

In the Gospel of St John, at her first appearance the Mother of Jesus initiates Christ’s entry into his public mission by showing his glory when she presents to him the need of the Wedding Feast of Cana. “*They have no wine*” (John 2: 3) — it is surely a symbol of the need of fallen man, man who is the descendant of the first Eve. Significantly, Christ addresses her as “*Woman*.” In the book of Genesis, Eve was the “*Woman*” whom God had created from “*the Man*” and whom the Serpent so successfully tempted (Genesis 2:22-3:2). The “*Woman*” took the fruit and ate it, and gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate of it (Genesis 3:6). The “*Woman*” was “*the mother of all the living*” (Genesis 3:20). At the Wedding Feast of Cana (surely a symbol also of the banquet of the Kingdom of God in which Christ is the Bridegroom), Christ addresses his mother as “*Woman*.”

This was a respectful form of address (Our Lord and the angels address Mary Magdalene in similar fashion on the morning of his Resurrection, as we read in John 20:15). But in addressing his own mother as “*Woman*” at the wedding of Cana, Our Lord also intimates that she is the new *Eve*, the new “*Woman*,” the new “*mother of all the living*.” At the outset of the public ministry, then, St John presents a new beginning being made to creation and to man. The Letter to the Hebrews presents Jesus Christ as our great High Priest who always intercedes for us his brothers at the right hand of the Father. John reminds us that Mary his mother is the new Eve who by her prayer and intercession initiated the public ministry of the Redeemer, and who, therefore, is the help of Christians and of man in need. At the foot of the Cross, St John once again presents the mother of Jesus. At this final moment, with the redemption well-nigh completed, the new Adam addresses her as the “*Woman*.” She is the new Eve, the mother of all the living. Jesus gives her to the beloved disciple, directing her to regard him as her son, and him to regard her as his

mother. The new Eve is at one with the new Adam in his sufferings, and in their obedience the contrast with the first Adam and the first Eve is total. As Christians, we are all called to follow in the footsteps of the suffering Messiah. We have a mother — the first and foremost Christian — to help us do this by her intercession and her perfect example.

Hail Mary! You who are full of grace — as the Angel said, the Lord is with you! Most blessed are you among women, and for all generations will you thus be called blessed. Blessed is the fruit of your womb — Jesus our Redeemer and our God! O holy Mary, mother of God the Son made man, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death! “Woman” most holy, new Eve, mother of all the living, help us be more and more united to Jesus your Son, so that we may share in the glory you now enjoy through the merits of the one and only Redeemer.

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Second reflection: (John 19:25-27)

“Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother and his mother’s sister, Mary..”

It is nearly 2000 years ago at a backwater of the Roman Empire, on a small rise outside the walls of Jerusalem. Three men were being crucified and one of them claimed to be the long awaited Messiah. In front of him was a small group that included his mother. The one being crucified knew that he was the protagonist in a cosmic drama going on at that moment, and it was all hinging on his obedient sufferings. He was mankind’s sacrifice to God for sin. He knew he was the priest and the victim. By his obedient suffering he would save the world from sin and unite it, in principle, to God. One other person present at that scene knew this too. That person was his mother. But she was not just a knowing spectator. She was utterly united with her Son, the Suffering Servant of God before her. She shared in his sufferings and in his attitude to God his Father. Inasmuch as precisely by his

obedient suffering he redeemed mankind, by her obedient suffering in union with him, she shared in his work of redeeming mankind. In this she was the spiritual mother and model of a host of children. Just as God is the sole creator of the world and yet man may, by his daily work collaborate with God in his creative work, so too Mary collaborated with her Son in the redemption of the world. She did this in her hidden situation on the hill of Calvary, unnoticed but incalculably effective in her union with the Redeemer.

So too, the ordinary Christian of any time, place and calling may collaborate with Jesus in the redemption of the world by his or her daily obedience, especially by that obedience that is marked by suffering. St Paul writes that by his sufferings he was able *“to make up for all that has still to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his body the Church”* (Colossians 1:24). The ordinary Christian, whatever be his situation and work in life, may stand with Mary at the foot of the Cross, notably at Mass where the one sacrifice of Calvary is made truly present in

sacramental mode. This union with the Redeemer is especially effected in Holy Communion. Let us day by day be united with Mary our Mother and our Model at the foot of the Cross, and in Christ let us contribute by our daily work and our obedient suffering to the redemption of mankind.



Saint Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist (September 21)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Mt 28:19-20 Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, says the Lord.

Collect O God, who with untold mercy were pleased to choose as an Apostle Saint Matthew, the tax collector, grant that, sustained by his example and intercession, we may merit to hold firm in following you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

St Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist. Also called Levi, he was the son of Alphaeus. He was a publican, that is, a tax collector for the Romans. His profession was hateful to the Jews. Nevertheless, our lord called him to be one of the Twelve. Matthew's vocation reminds us that sanctity is not reserved for privileged persons. All states in life, all professions, all noble tasks may be sanctified, as the Church teaches. Matthew is one of the Twelve Apostles.

We do not know details of his evangelization or of his martyrdom — which perhaps took place in Persia. Tradition unanimously acknowledges him as the author of the first Gospel, written in Aramaic, the language that our Lord himself spoke, and translated into Greek afterwards. St Matthew's name appears among the other apostles in the Roman Canon.

Scripture today: Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-13; Psalm 19:2-5;
Matthew 9:9-13

As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. Follow me, he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'? On hearing this, Jesus said, It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I

desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners. (Matthew 9:9-13)

Matthew The call of Matthew as given in our Gospel passage today features in all three Synoptic Gospels. In Matthew’s Gospel, our Lord begins his ministry with the call of Simon and Andrew, and James and John, and great crowds from Galilee and beyond follow him (4:25). After this, the long summary of his teaching is given in the Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5 to 7). Several incidents are then reported including his forgiveness of the sins of the paralytic and healing of his paralysis. Then there follows the second occasion when he calls a man to follow him. On this second occasion it is “*Matthew*” he calls (Matthew 9:9). There are various references to his “*disciples*” (eg. 9:14, 9:19, 9:37), and we read of “*his twelve disciples*” when he gives them a share in his own powers. They are designated as “*the twelve apostles,*” and their names being given (10:1-5). Among them is “*Matthew the tax collector*” — the man called by Christ in 9:9, our passage today. The call of Matthew is

the only specific call of an Apostle in Matthew's Gospel other than the four (chief ones) who were first. In Mark the pattern is the same. In Mark, at the beginning of the public ministry, our Lord calls Simon and Andrew and then James and John (1:16-20), followed by various teachings and healings in his ministry. As in Matthew, there is the forgiveness of the sins of the paralytic and his physical healing, and then Christ calls "*Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth*" (2:14). There are other references to Christ's "*disciples*" and there is the appointment of the Twelve whom he named Apostles — among whom is Matthew (3:18) and "*James son of Alphaeus.*" We need not tease out the details of these names. In Luke's Gospel, Christ calls Simon (Andrew is not mentioned), James and John (5:9-11), and once again after the forgiveness and healing of the paralytic, there is the call by Christ of "*a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth*" (5:27). Luke adds the important detail that Levi "*left everything*" for his master (5:28). A little later there is the choosing of the

Twelve, among whom is “*Matthew.. and James of Alphaeus*” — the same list as is given in Mark.

While John gives details of the call of other disciples (such as Philip and Nathanael), in the three Synoptics, apart from Simon, Andrew, James and John, as already said the only Apostle whose call is described is “Levi,” or “Matthew.” So Matthew has a special place in the Gospel accounts. There is this to be noticed too. In Matthew’s list of the Twelve, “Matthew” is the only one whose working profession is noted: he is “*Matthew the tax collector.*” Mark does not note this, nor does Luke who, though, had especially recorded that Matthew “*left everything.*” Matthew’s recording for posterity that he, one of the Twelve, was a “*tax collector*” doubtless was due to his humble gratitude for his inestimable call. It follows Christ’s forgiveness of the sins of the paralytic, perhaps suggesting Matthew’s own consciousness of sin and forgiveness by Christ’s redemptive death. Importantly, his call is followed by the accusation of the Pharisees that the Master was associating and dining with “*tax collectors and*

sinners” (Matthew 9:11). Matthew was one of them — and at the forefront, in the sense that he was a direct companion of the holy and wonderful Prophet of Galilee. Christ responds to the Pharisees by saying that he had come to call “*sinners*” (9:13), and that the Pharisees should learn the meaning of the dictum of Scripture that God desires mercy of his people. Matthew had been the recipient of the mercy of Jesus Christ, and perhaps the singular mention of his call in each of the three Synoptics is meant by them to illustrate the wonders of God’s mercy. St Paul would say of himself (1 Timothy 1: 12-16) that he was the greatest of sinners: “*I received mercy... Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners — of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy..*” St Paul saw himself as an “*example to those who would come to believe in him*” — so, I am sure, did St Matthew. He puts himself forward in his Gospel as a “*tax collector,*” a sinner called by grace and mercy. Christ stated to the Pharisees that he came to save such as he, and all who read

the Gospel ought take to heart his story, which, as already said, appears in each of the three Synoptics.

We read in the Gospel of St Luke (Luke 18:9-14) Our Lord's famous parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, each praying in the Temple. The tax collector stood down the back praying over and over his prayer for God's pardon: "*O God, be merciful to me a sinner!*" He it was who went home at rights with God. One wonders if, at least to a point, our Lord fondly drew upon his love for Matthew the Apostle in formulating this parable. Doubtlessly, Matthew did embody the prayer and the spiritual attitude of the publican in our Lord's parable. Let us do likewise.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 9:9)

“As Jesus was walking on he saw a man named Matthew sitting by the customs house, and he said to him, ‘Follow me’. And he got up and followed him.”

How beautiful is this scene! Our Lord calls the least to a position so critical for the future of his Church, to be one of the Twelve. It is an aspect of our Lord’s maxim that the last will be first. At the heart of the call is the simple invitation to Matthew to follow him, and to do so totally. This invitation our Lord extends to each of us who are baptised. We are all called to follow our Lord and to do so with the utmost dedication and a full heart. What does this entail? It entails many things but St Paul puts it clearly when he exhorts the reader to *“let this mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”* Our Lord expresses it this way: *“Come to me, all you that labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Yes, my yoke is easy and*

my burden light.” Following our Lord means endeavouring to grow in his virtues in a thorough-going way, and our Lord tells us which virtues are especially important. They are his humility and his meekness. As we think of the history of mankind and of our own personal history, let us frankly recognise the prevalence of pride. Our pride has to be replaced with Christ like humility, and with that humility, meekness. The very occasions when our pride is hurt by others offer the opportunity to work at humility, by accepting the humiliation. The cultivation of gratitude counters pride. Above all, frequent acts of sorrow for sin and fervently and frequently approaching the Sacrament of Penance will offer regular opportunities for humility to be cultivated, together with the grace of God to sustain our efforts.

Let us accept with St Matthew Christ’s invitation to follow him in mind and spirit daily.



Saints Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Archangels

(September 29)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 103 (102):20 Bless the Lord, all you his angels, mighty in power, fulfilling his word, and heeding his voice.

Collect O God, who dispose in marvellous order ministries both angelic and human, graciously grant that our life on earth may be defended by those who watch over us as they minister perpetually to you in heaven. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

The Archangels:

Michael ('Who is like God?') was the archangel who fought against Satan and all his evil angels, defending all the friends of God. He is the protector of all humanity and reminds us of the real existence of the devil and of

diabolical activity. To protect us from the snares of the devil, it is good to have recourse to St Michael.

Gabriel ('Strength of God') announced to Zechariah the coming birth of John the Baptist and to Mary the birth of Jesus. His greeting to the Virgin, 'Hail, full of Grace' is one of the most familiar and frequent prayers of the Christian people.

Raphael ('Medicine of God') is the archangel who took care of Tobias on his journey. Every person on his pilgrimage through this life has a guardian angel with a mission similar to that of Raphael.

Scripture today: Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14 or Rev. 12:7-12ab;
Psalm 138:1-5; John 1:47-51

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false. How do you know me? Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you. Then Nathanael declared, Rabbi,

you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel. Jesus said, You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that. He then added, I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man. (John 1:47-51)

Archangels

In our Gospel today (John 1: 47 51) our Lord refers to the angels of God. There is a bit of a problem with “angels” in our day, a day of ambiguity of attitude to historical revelation. There are religious people for whom “angels” are a non-entity. There are also those who are otherwise quite Catholic-minded in the practice of their religion, but for whom “angels” are a non-entity. That is, they never think of them, nor do they pray to them. There are Christians for whom “angels” are a ridiculous distraction from Jesus Christ. On the other hand there are many today who are endeavouring to “connect with their angels” or have some sort of spiritual experience with them. Some Ouija Boards have become “Angel Boards,” and there are “Angel Cards” or “Oracle Cards.” Some

people claim to have contact with angels, and say that angels speak through them. There are many books by New Age authors on angels, and there are people who hold workshops for people to contact angels. I am sorry to have to say it, but such doubtless well-intentioned people are daft. Whatever spirits are contacted in such ways — if spirits they are — they are certainly not those whom in the Gospels our Lord refers to as “angels.” They are not the angels a few of whom Holy Scripture attributes the specific names of Michael, Gabriel and Raphael. The Church’s liturgy today celebrates the feast of these three angels, entitled “archangels” because of the eminence of their messages and missions from God to man, and they are venerated in the tradition of the Church. The witness of Scripture and Tradition is absolutely clear. In the post-Vatican II Novus Ordo Missal of Pope St Paul VI these three Archangels are celebrated together on this day, September 29. In the 1962 pre-Vatican II Missal of Pope St John XXIII (now the Missal of the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite), today is the feast of St Michael, March

24 that of St Gabriel, and October 24 that of St Raphael. There is this to be observed immediately from these liturgical facts: the reality of these three Archangels is absolutely certain, and secondly they are filled with holiness before God. In morality and sanctity, they are utterly unlike the spirits of New Age imaginings, just as they are unlike the lesser deities of so many religions, including the classical.

The name of the archangel *Michael* means, in Hebrew, *who is like unto God*. His name appears in Scripture four times, twice in the Book of Daniel (Daniel 10:13 and Daniel 12), once in the Epistle of St. Jude (“When Michael the Archangel, disputing with the devil, contended about the body of Moses”) and once in the Book of Revelation (Apocalypse 12:7: “*And there was a great battle in heaven, Michael and his angels fought with the dragon*”). As a matter of fact, the Fathers often assert that St. Michael is present in Scripture where his name is not mentioned. They say he was the cherub who stood at the gate of paradise, “*to keep the way of the tree of life*”

(Genesis 3:24), the angel who stood in the way against Balaam (Numbers 22:22) and the angel who routed the army of Sennacherib (2 Kings 19:35). The Church recommends to us that we invoke St. Michael to help us in our fight against Satan. The Archangel *Raphael* appears in the Septuagint Bible in the Book of Tobias, and the Church's celebration of him with a Feast of the Liturgical Year confirms the witness of this Old Testament Book. When Tobias (Tobit 12) was occupied in his works of mercy and charity, the angel Raphael offered his prayer to the Lord. He was sent by the Lord to heal him of his blindness and to deliver Sara, his son's wife, from the devil. We also read in the Gospel of St John 5:1 4, that at the pool where the multitude of the infirm awaited the moving of the water, "*an angel of the Lord descended at certain times into the pond; and the water was moved. And he that went down first into the pond after the motion of the water was made whole of whatever infirmity he lay under*". Some commentators regard this angel as Raphael, the angel of healing in Tobias. The archangel *Gabriel* appears in the

Book of Daniel (ch. 8, 9 and probably 10), and in the infancy narratives of St Luke, Gabriel foretells to Zachary the birth of the Precursor, and to Mary that of the Saviour. To Mary, whom he addresses as “*full of grace, the Lord is with you,*” he says that “*I am Gabriel, who stand before God*” (Luke 1:19).

Let us study and learn more about the angels and Archangels and love them. Today we think of the latter, those who are specifically mentioned in Holy Scripture, by name. If Christ is our Friend, then so too are the Archangels. They are without sin, having chosen totally for God their Creator. They serve him constantly, and are filled with life and happiness. They are determined to get us over the line that matters — the judgment of God — and into our true homeland of heaven where they await us. The angelic world is a vast kingdom of its own, with ranks. It is a kingdom at the service of Christ the King. Our Lord said in the Garden that at a word he could summon twelve legions of angels to his support. Michael would have been at the head of them. Let us love and pray to them! There

are two Standards, and our three archangels carry Christ's Standard.



Memorial of the Guardian Angels (October 2)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Dn 3:58 Angels of the Lord, bless the Lord, praise and exalt him above all for ever.

Collect O God, who in your unfathomable providence are pleased to send your holy Angels to guard us, hear our supplication as we cry to you, that we may always be defended by their protection and rejoice eternally in their company. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

The Guardian Angels: Perhaps no aspect of Catholic piety is as comforting to parents as the belief that an angel protects their little ones from dangers real and imagined. Yet guardian angels are not just for children. Their role is to represent individuals before God, to watch over them always, to aid their prayer and to present their souls to God at death. The concept of an angel assigned to guide and nurture each human being is a development of Catholic

doctrine and piety based on Scripture but not directly drawn from it. Jesus' words in Matthew 18:10 best support the belief: "See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven always look upon the face of my heavenly Father." Devotion to the angels began to develop with the birth of the monastic tradition. St. Benedict gave it impetus and Bernard of Clairvaux, the great 12th-century reformer, was such an eloquent spokesman for the guardian angels that angelic devotion assumed its current form in his day. A feast in honour of the guardian angels was first observed in the 16th century. In 1615, Pope Paul V added it to the Roman calendar. "May the angels lead you into paradise; may the martyrs come to welcome you and take you to the holy city, the new and eternal Jerusalem." (*Rite for Christian Burial*)

Scripture today: Exodus 23:20-23; Psalm 90;

Matthew 18:1-5, 10

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. (Matthew 18:1-5, 10)

Guardian Angels One can sometimes miss things in Holy Scripture. For example, the Sadducees accepted only the five books of Moses (the Torah) as the sources of the divine Law. According to various sources (including the Gospels and, say, Acts 23:6-9) they did not accept the final resurrection from the dead — the soul dies with the body, so they thought. They saw nothing of this belief in the Torah. The Sadducees were deeply involved with the Temple and it may even be that up to 20 of the 28

high priests in the century between 37 BC and 66 AD were Sadducees. Well then, they put a puzzle to our Lord designed to show the absurdity of the doctrine of the resurrection. Our Lord's reply, quoting from the Torah itself (in Exodus 3:6) highlighted a meaning of this text that would probably escape the average reader of Exodus — and certainly the Sadducees. *“I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”* not only reveals the true and only God, but also the *living status* of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Indirectly, God is revealing that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are *alive* — they survived their physical deaths. Their souls did not perish and in some sense they were in a living relationship with God. One of the things this teaching of Christ demonstrates is that the inspired Scriptures are rich in meaning, and we ought treasure their smallest remarks. So too with our text today, presented to us by the Church on the day we remember our Guardian Angels. *“Whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. See that you do not look down on one of these little ones.*

For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven” (Matthew 18:1-5, 10). In this respect, let us remember that a belief in guardian angels can be traced throughout all antiquity. Pagans, like Menander and Plutarch (cf. Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica*, xii), and Neo-Platonists, like Plotinus, also held the belief. So did the Babylonians and Assyrians, as their monuments testify, for a figure of a guardian angel, now in the British Museum, once decorated an Assyrian palace. This belief is of course present in the Old Testament. For instance, in Genesis 28-29, angels deliver Lot from danger. Exodus 12-13 and 32:34, Psalm 90:11, and Daniel 10 each bear witness to the belief.

In the New Testament Angels are the intermediaries between God and man; and Christ sets a seal upon the Old Testament teaching in our Gospel passage today: *“for I say to you, that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.”* (Matthew 18:10). Even little children have Guardian Angels, and these same angels do not lose the vision of God by the fact that they have a

mission to fulfil on earth. This great fact of *individuals having an angel* to guard them is, we may say, a special piece of information coming from the lips of Christ. We remember the angel who helped Christ in the garden (“*and there appeared to him an angel from heaven strengthening him*” Luke 22:43), and the angel who delivered the apostles (Acts 5:19) and Peter (Acts ch.12) from prison. In Hebrews 1:14, the inspired author asks, “*Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain salvation?*” This is the mission of the guardian angels: they are to lead us, if we wish it, to salvation. As St. Jerome expressed it: “*how great the dignity of the soul, since each one has from his birth an angel commissioned to guard it*” (*Commentary on Matthew*, xviii, lib. II). There are some variations as to details in what is taught by theologians. For instance, whether *every soul* coming into the world receives a guardian spirit is disputed: St. Basil (*Homily on Psalm 43*), and possibly St. John Chrysostom (*Homily 3 on Colossians*) held that only Christians were privileged by

God in this way. Our Guardian Angels can act upon our senses and upon our imaginations — but they cannot push or force our wills. Finally, they are not separated from us after death, and remain our friends in heaven. What a friend is our Guardian Angel! A very good work of literature to read is St John Henry Newman's *Dream of Gerontius* (1865), in which the Guardian Angel assists the departed soul as he leaves this life and begins his Purgatory. The basic fact which we celebrate today is that each of us has an Angel of God to help us on our way to Heaven. This is a magnificent gift of God in his mercy. *"O Angel of God, my Guardian dear, to whom God's love commits me here! Ever this day be at my side, to light and guard, to rule and guide. Amen!"* Let us become more and more aware of this important doctrine of the Church, explicitly attested by Christ in our Gospel today. Let us cultivate a loving devotion to our Guardian Angels, asking their help and guidance so as to make our way up the ladder of holiness into our everlasting homeland.



Feast of St Luke, Evangelist (October 18)

Entrance Antiphon Is 52:7 How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings glad tidings of peace, bearing good news, announcing salvation!

Collect Lord God, who chose Saint Luke to reveal by his preaching and writings the mystery of your love for the poor, grant that those who already glory in your name may persevere as one heart and one soul and that all nations may merit to see your salvation. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

St Luke the Evangelist Thought to be a physician from Antioch, he was converted to the Christian faith. He was a disciple of St Paul and a faithful companion in all his journeys. He was the author of the third Gospel and of the Acts of the Apostles. He was the evangelist who wrote about the childhood of Jesus (undoubtedly drawing on the testimony of his Mother) and who has told us some of the

most moving parables of the Lord, such as that of the lost sheep and the prodigal son. In his gospel he highlights the universality of salvation.

Scripture today: 2 Timothy 4:10-17b; Psalm 145;

Luke 10:1-9

The Lord Jesus appointed seventy two disciples whom he sent ahead of him in pairs to every town and place he intended to visit. He said to them, “The harvest is abundant but the labourers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out labourers for his harvest. Go on your way; behold, I am sending you like lambs among wolves. Carry no money bag, no sack, no sandals; and greet no one along the way. Into whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this household.’ If a peaceful person lives there, your peace will rest on him; but if not, it will return to you. Stay in the same house and eat and drink what is offered to you, for the labourer deserves payment. Do not move about from one house to another. Whatever town you enter and they welcome you, eat what

is set before you, cure the sick in it and say to them, 'The Kingdom of God is at hand for you.'" (Luke 10:1-9)

Saint Luke By Christ's design and teaching for his Church, following Pentecost there emerged different groupings or orders of his disciples, as we might call them. All the baptized shared in the life of Christ — all were, to use St Paul's phrase, "*in Christ*." But, for instance, not all were constituted "Apostles" by the Spirit, nor were all constituted "pastors." As the Church later expressed the matter in her formal doctrine, all the baptized share in the priesthood of Jesus Christ, but some do so in essentially different ways from others. This difference is manifested, though not restricted to, specific functions. The ordained priest celebrates Mass, administers the Sacraments of Penance, the Anointing of the Sick and often Confirmation. He shepherds Christ's faithful and sanctifies them with the life of Christ. With these heavenly blessings, the lay faithful characteristically are the instruments of Christ's presence in the world of family, friends, community, culture, work, government and international life. The lay

faithful are called to bear witness in the world to the one and only Saviour. They bring the world into union with him, and hence into the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever be their order or kind of participation in Christ, all are called by Christ to holiness and mission. We gain a glimpse of this in our Gospel passage today, in which “*the Lord Jesus appointed seventy two disciples whom he sent ahead of him in pairs to every town and place he intended to visit. He said to them, ‘The harvest is abundant but the labourers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out labourers for his harvest. Go on your way; behold, I am sending you like lambs among wolves.’*” Let us think of those seventy-two for a moment — were all of them destined to be “pastors”? At least, it would seem, one of them was destined to be an “Apostle” — one of the Twelve, no less, and hence an “Apostle” in a sense more special than that in which St Paul would be an “Apostle.” I refer to *Matthias* who would be elected to replace Judas (Acts 1:26). He had been in our Lord’s “*company all through the time when the Lord Jesus came and went*

among us, from the time when John baptized to the day when he, Jesus, was taken from us” (Acts 1: 21)

That was Matthias, Apostle and one of the Twelve. Perhaps others of them were destined to be “pastors” of the future Church and in time would be endowed by the Spirit (through the action and ministry of the Church) with such spiritual powers as the celebration of the Eucharist and the forgiveness of sins. But I suspect that the majority of these seventy-two were what we would now call future “lay” members of Christ’s faithful. They would scarcely have *all* been future clergy, endowed with the Sacrament of Orders. But our Lord sent them all out on mission before him, all seventy-two. Their case reminds us that all of Christ’s disciples are, in virtue of their very discipleship, engaged in doing what our Lord had come to do — which is to make disciples of all. In Matthew’s Gospel, our Lord’s final charge to his disciples was a charge given not only to the Eleven, but to *all* who had gathered on the Mountain in Galilee: “*you, therefore, must go and make disciples of all the nations*” (Matthew 28:19). All of this brings us to Saint

Luke, the inspired author of the third Gospel and of the Acts of the Apostles, and the one commemorated by the Church on this, his feast day. Luke was not one of the Twelve. He does not seem to have been among those, like Matthias, who were with our Lord during his public ministry, nor among, say, the seventy-two (although we cannot be sure, of course). He was a later convert, it seems, and not a future “pastor,” or ordained priest. He was a lay collaborator of St Paul, a medical man by profession, and one for whom Jesus Christ was his all. He, a “lay” member of Christ’s faithful as we might now categorize him, has had and will have an incalculable influence on the life of the Church and all the faithful till the end of the world. This influence will be exercised through his inspired writings — his *Gospel*, and his *Acts* (his account of the infant Church). Innumerable persons come to know Christ through St Luke. Inasmuch as the Gospels are the most important part of all the Scriptures, as being the books *par excellence* through which the Person of Jesus Christ is known personally, a case could be made

for thinking of St Luke’s spiritual influence over history as equalling and, dare we say, perhaps even surpassing that of the Letters of his incomparable superior, St Paul.

The point here is that St Luke is a model “lay” member of Christ’s faithful. He is an example for all time of how all of Christ’s faithful are called to seek holiness by means of union with Jesus Christ, sharing also in his mission — each according to his vocation. St Luke did this, not precisely in the way that his companion and superior, St Paul, did it. Nor did he do it in the way that Simon Peter, the Rock of the Church, did it — for his was a different vocation. He did it as what we would now call a “lay” baptized member of the Church, and as such his contribution to the life of the Church, specifically through his inspired writings, was and ever will be, simply incalculable. Let us all take note of this.

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Second reflection: (Luke 10:1-9)

“Cure those in it who are sick, and say, “The kingdom of God is very near to you.”

On this feast of St Luke, the author of the third Gospel and of the *Acts*, we are presented with the scene in which “*the Lord appointed seventy two others and sent them out ahead of him, in pairs, to all the towns and places he himself was to visit.*” Let us ponder on the content of the message they were to deliver: “*The Kingdom of God is very near to you*” (Luke 10: 1-9). What is the Kingdom of God? It is, of course, God’s kingship, his reign, his rule — but these terms are general and their content can appear to be abstract. What is it, specifically? The Kingdom of God in the first instance is the very Person of Christ in whom the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily. His life involved nothing other than the fulfilment of the will of his heavenly Father. God’s Kingdom, his lordship and rule, comes to a person supremely when that person is, to use St Paul’s phrase, “*in Christ.*” God’s Kingdom is at work in a

person's life when that person lives out his life in a manner worthy of his being in union with Christ. When the Church proclaims that the Kingdom of God is near, what is meant above all is that *Christ* is with us, that *he* is near. In him God and his rule are nigh.

As St Paul writes: *in Christ there is given every heavenly blessing*. As St Ignatius Loyola expresses it in his great prayer to Christ in his *Spiritual Exercises*, take all else, O Lord, but give me your love and your grace, and this will be enough. Let us then make Christ our all. In him we receive all the promises of God, and without him all is as nothing.



Feast of Simon and Jude, Apostles (October 28)

Entrance Antiphon These are the holy men whom the Lord chose in his own perfect love; to them he gave eternal glory.

Collect O God, who by the blessed Apostles have brought us to acknowledge your name, graciously grant, through the intercession of Saints Simon and Jude, that the Church may constantly grow by increase of the peoples who believe in you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Simon and Jude Simon is usually called “the Zealot” (Luke 6:15), probably because he belonged to the Jewish party of the “Zealous of the Law.” Jude, also called Thaddeus or “Courageous,” is the disputed author of a short epistle in the New Testament. Tradition has it that they preached in Mesopotamia and Persia and there were martyred. Their names appear in the Roman Canon. Pope

Benedict XVI once had this to say about Simon and Jude: “Simon is called “Cananaean” and “Zealot.” Both expressions stress his passionate attachment to his Jewish identity. That Simon could live in harmony with Matthew the tax collector in the same community, shows us how in the Church, through the grace of Christ, differences can be overcome. The other Apostle, Jude, is sometimes called Thaddaeus. When he asks a question regarding the Lord’s manifestation to the Apostles rather than to others, Jesus insists on the need for love as an inner preparation for the presence of God in our soul. In the letter of the New Testament, traditionally attributed to the Apostle Jude, a strong emphasis is placed on keeping true to our Christian identity. As we bear witness to the truth that has been revealed to us, we are encouraged by the Apostle’s words: *“Build yourselves up on your most holy faith, pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God, wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life”* (Jude 20-21).”

Scripture today: Ephesians 2:19-22; Psalm 19:2-5;

Luke 6:12-19

One of those days Jesus went out to a mountain to pray, and spent the whole night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles: Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor. He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all. (Luke 6:12-19)

Simon and Jude It is plain from this passage that Christ's appointment of the Twelve from among his disciples was a very significant step. Their position was of great importance in our Lord's mission and in what he was soon to establish. They were the visible foundation of his Church. Mark (3: 14-15) tells us that Jesus "*appointed twelve to be with him and to be sent out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons.*" The other disciples did not, normally, live with Jesus on his mission — but the Twelve did. They were to act in his name on mission and exercise some of his powers. In Matthew (10:1) we read that "*he gave them power over unclean spirits to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity.*" At this point our Lord was preaching, driving out demons and healing every infirmity — this is what he was empowering them to do. In his account of the appointment of the Twelve in our passage today (Luke 6: 12-19), Luke does not describe their office — he presumes it is known. In a later chapter (9: 1-5) he narrates how Jesus "*called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over*

all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal.” This is more or less what our Lord himself was doing at this stage, although he did do more than this. He forgave sins, for instance. He raised the dead. He calmed storms. He fed vast crowds. He spoke with unequalled authority. Granted this, they were, then, his envoys and did what he was doing and thus extended his presence and reach. They were the Church in embryo and in formation, awaiting the coming of the Spirit after Christ’s return to the Father. In fact, the nature of their mission would be made clearer after Christ’s Resurrection. *“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all I have commanded you; and behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age”* (Matthew 28: 19-20). In Luke, the risen Christ promises *“power from on high”* and then they will preach repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem (24:47-49).

But the next thing we notice is that many of the Twelve are known to us little more than by name. Their names appear in the lists of the Twelve, but for many of them, that is the last we hear of them as individuals. Simon and Jude constitute a case in point. Simon is called “*Cananaean*” and “*Zealot*,” and we can deduce a little from this. Jude, sometimes called Thaddaeus, asks Christ a question at the Last Supper regarding the Lord’s manifestation to the apostles rather than to others. There is a Letter of one page in the New Testament by “*Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James*” (verse 1), which is traditionally attributed to our Jude the Apostle. I suspect that this inspired Letter is, unfortunately, rarely read. There are traditions about their histories, but in the main Simon and Jude disappear from the annals of history rather quickly despite their being members of the Twelve. In the Book of Revelation we read how the Author, “*in the Spirit*” is carried away to a great high mountain and shown “*the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God ... and the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and*

on them the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (21: 10-14). Two of those names were, of course, those of Simon and Jude. They were foundations of the Church, but we scarcely know anything about them. Among many things, this surely reminds us that however important this or that saint may have been in God’s plan and providence, there are greater things still. Christ is the focus of the life of the Christian and of the Church from age to age, whatever good work this or that holy Christian may have done. Simon and Jude also bear witness to the pivotal role of the Church in God’s plan. They were among the Church’s foundations, and they point to the Church, just as the Church points to Christ. We, all of us, by our baptism, become members of the Church and thereby members of Christ — just as by baptism we become members of Christ, and thereby members of the Church. Simon and Jude remind us that the Christian life is not simply a matter of “Christ and me.” Christ is the Head of his body the Church, and we who are in Christ by baptism are thereby members of his Church, as were Simon

and Jude. Their relative anonymity casts into greater relief the fact of the Church.

As we think of Simon and Jude, Apostles whom we perhaps do not sufficiently think of and yet whom the Church celebrates every year with a Feast Day, let us think of what they stood for. They stood for Jesus Christ and his Church. They gave their lives for him and for his body the Church. Let us do likewise in all our anonymity and ordinariness of life. For the overwhelming majority of us, life pursues an ordinary and obscure course. We shall never appear again in the annals of history. We shall never have a footnote to our name. Yet our ordinary lives can attain a grandeur, and it will depend on our dedication to Jesus Christ and his Church. Let us take our cue from Simon and Jude. We all have the same Love that was theirs. That Love is Jesus Christ.

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Second reflection: (Luke 6: 12-19)

“When day came he summoned his disciples and picked out twelve of them; called ‘Apostles’.”

Today is a feast day in the Church’s year, a day of very special solemnity, for it is the feast of two of the Twelve Apostles. Simon and Jude were very important to our Lord. We are told in the Gospel passage of today that *“he spent the whole night in prayer to God. When day came he summoned his disciples and picked out twelve of them; he called them ‘apostles’.”* We are told elsewhere in the Gospel that our Lord sent out seventy-two of his disciples, two by two, on mission. There would have been many other disciples, apart from the seventy-two. We are told by St Paul that after our Lord rose from the dead five hundred saw him on one occasion. But now, of these disciples he chose only *twelve* to be the foundation of the Church he was establishing. Simon and Jude were among them. Our two Apostles today lived with Our Lord and went on to be part of the very basis of the Church after the

Resurrection and Pentecost. Yet despite their great importance in the plan of God we know practically nothing about Simon and Jude. What are we to make of this anonymity which is characteristic of a number of the Twelve? One thing it surely means is that relative anonymity and seeming ordinariness is part and parcel of the plan of God, and the medium within which God does his work.

We are part of this. The task ahead is to make of our ordinary and blessed anonymity something grand in the sight of God. We do so by doing God's will, which means the work he has set us to do, however humdrum and unnoticed it may be. It is God who will be working in and through our work, provided we do well the work he gave us, and provided we do it out of love for him.

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Third reflection: (Philippians 1:1-11)

“From Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus” (Phil 1:1) Today we celebrate the Apostles Simon and Jude, and in thinking of the apostolic foundation of the Church, we are led to think of the Church itself. It would be an interesting exercise to ask various members of the Church what exactly they think the Catholic Church is. Their notion of the Church will profoundly affect the way they live out their membership of it. If they regard it as an institution wholly dependent on the activities of its leaders, that notion will shape their life in it. In Philippians 1: 1-11, St Paul mentions a fundamental aspect of the life of the Church: its life of *communion*. The apostles were the foundation of a great communion in Christ. He and Timothy are “*servants of Jesus Christ*”, and they write to “*all the saints in Jesus Christ, together with the presiding elders and deacons.*” The Church consists of those — whether the body of “*the saints*” or “*their presiding elders and deacons*” — who are “*in Jesus Christ.*” It is because of this fact, this being “*in*

Christ,” that there is a great communion that constitutes the life of the Church. The Church is the communion of “*the saints.*” In the Creed we state that we believe in the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church, the communion of saints. This is because we believe in Jesus Christ whose servants we are, and in whom the entire Church lives.

This communion of life in Christ is the source of a life of apostolic sharing, and it is Christ himself the Church’s members desire to share. That is what St Paul rejoices in with respect to the Philippians: they “*have helped to spread the Good News from the day you first heard it right up to the present.*” St Paul is full of confidence in them “*since you have shared the privileges which have been mine: both my chains and my work defending and establishing the gospel.*” That is to say, the Church is a great communion in Christ, and her life is to live in communion, sharing together and with others the blessings, the mission and the trials of her Lord, whose servants her members are.



Feast of All Saints (November 1)

Entrance Antiphon Let us all rejoice in the Lord, as we celebrate the feast day in honour of all the Saints, at whose festival the Angels rejoice and praise the Son of God.

Collect Almighty ever living God, by whose gift we venerate in one celebration the merits of all the Saints, bestow on us, we pray, through the prayers of so many intercessors, an abundance of the reconciliation with you for which we earnestly long. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Feast of All Saints Today we celebrate the feast of all the unknown saints who are now in heaven. The Church reminds us that sanctity is within everyone's reach. Through the Communion of Saints we help one another achieve sanctity. "After this I had a vision of a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue. They stood before the throne and

before the Lamb, wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands.... [One of the elders] said to me, ‘These are the ones who have survived the time of great distress; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb’“ (Revelation 7:9,14).

Scripture today: Revelation 7:2-4, 9-14; Psalm 24:1bc-6;
1 John 3:1-3; Matthew 5:1-12a

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed

are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.
(Matthew 5:1-12a)

Heaven Mankind has generally held that the human being does not end with physical death. I suspect that that is as far as we can go in characterizing the beliefs of man in respect to the Afterlife, because of their enormous variety. Of course, there have been many who believe that the end of this life renders a man extinct. I clearly remember one cheerful man in his late seventies who thought that his future was no different from that of any animal. His grave would be his end. Atheists, secular humanists and agnostics tend not to believe in life after death. Those of non-theistic religions such as Buddhism tend to believe in an Afterlife, but without reference to a God. Many religions — whether they believe in the soul's existence in another world, or in re-incarnation — accept that one's position after this life is a reward or punishment for one's conduct. In Greek mythology the god Hades was

the king of the underworld, where souls live after death. Hermes, the messenger of the gods, would take the dead soul of a person to the underworld. He would leave the soul on the banks of the River Styx, the river between life and death, and Charon, the ferry man, would take the soul across the river to Hades. Once crossed, the soul would be judged by Aeacus, Rhadamanthus and King Minos. The soul would be sent either to Elysium, or to Tartarus, or to the Asphodel Fields. *Elysium* was for the ones that lived pure lives. It consisted of green fields, valleys and mountains, everyone there was peaceful and contented, and the Sun always shone there. *Tartarus* was for those who blasphemed against the gods, or were consciously evil. The *Asphodel Fields* were for a selection of human souls. That was the belief about the Afterlife in a pagan setting. The Gospels state that the Sadducees, who of course believed in God and accepted the Pentateuch, did not allow for a resurrection (Matthew 22:23). Our Lord instantly refuted their position by showing that the Pentateuch itself (as in Exodus 3:6) teaches that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

were still alive in God. At the time of our Lord, Jewish views on a resurrection were mixed. For instance, when our Lord told Martha that her brother Lazarus would rise again, Martha said to him “*I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day*” (John 11: 24). Our Lord proceeded to tell her that *he himself* is the resurrection and the life.

Christianity has no doubt about the matter. It is a fundamental dogma, expressed in the Nicene Creed, that “*I look forward to the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.*” It could be said that the Christian religion is far and away the religion with the most extensive and explicit teaching on the Hereafter, and this, of course, comes from her divine Founder, Jesus Christ. He has vouchsafed us with an awesome and momentous revelation on the matter. Following death, there will be one of two alternatives, depending on our conduct. It will be either heaven or hell in perpetuity — as a result of *God’s judgment* on our life. Those saved but as yet unfit for the divine presence, will be mercifully purified of the

stains of sin in a process which the Church has traditionally called Purgatory. On this day, the Feast of All Souls (November 1), the Church celebrates with joy all those now in the presence of God in the indescribable bliss of heaven. They have lived in the grace of God and according to his will. Some have done this heroically and have been formally recognized as such by the Church, and are venerated even in the Church's Liturgy. They are the Church's canonized saints. Their intercession is asked for by the Faithful, and they are proposed by the Church as models of Christian living. But there are numerous others who now live with God because of their good and even heroic lives, even if not recognized formally by the Church. There may be many unknown in heaven who lived lives of greater heroism in virtue than others who have been canonized by the Church. Numerous others now in Heaven would have passed through the purifying process of Purgatory and now live spotless in holiness before God. At the head of all and lustrous beyond all others, be they angels or saints, is the Mother of the

incarnate God, Mary the Immaculate One. She was always full of grace, and the Lord was ever with her. She, the first and foremost disciple, is the mother and model of the Church, just as she was mother and model of her divine Son our Lord Jesus Christ, who so surpassed her in every way. Today we think of the Church Triumphant, those in Christ who have, by the grace of God, gained the palm of victory.

Let us think a lot of heaven and of those now there. They join with Jesus Christ our High Priest who intercedes for us continually at the right hand of his heavenly Father. With him, they are our intercessors, and they await our joining them. Let us never imperil our heavenly destination by sin! How terrible it would be, to lose this prize of being with God forever! Christ said of Judas that *“woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born”* (Matthew 26:24). Let us live day by day in union with Jesus Christ, following in his footsteps whatever be the cost — a path described by our Lord in the Beatitudes

of our Gospel today (Matthew 5: 1-12a). Therein lies the path to glory without end.

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Second reflection: (Revelation 7:2-4, 9-14)

“They shouted aloud, ‘Victory to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”

Today we celebrate the holiness of all those in heaven and their triumph over the evil they encountered during their lives on earth. The most significant issue in the life of every human being is the call to goodness and the temptation to moral evil. One or the other will gain the victory. In the case of all those in heaven, the call to goodness gained the victory. But as our first reading (Revelation 7: 2-4, 9-14) makes vividly clear, the victory is God’s — and it is those in heaven who testify to this. From the first instant of our lives God involves himself intimately with us and fights on our side. He endeavours to unite us to himself in Christ, and to make us one with his

resistance to evil and struggle for the good. However strong evil may be, God is by far the stronger, and we have every reason to be confident in his power and mercy. The saints in heaven are the evidence of it, and they themselves are constantly interceding for us. Let us be inspired by their example and call on the help of their prayers. Let us then, here and now on this feast of all the saints, make our choice for God once again. To work, then! The call of conscience — the special dwelling place of the Holy Spirit within us — summons us to the work God has given us to do.

In and through this work of every day will lie the outcome of the struggle for good or for evil. Let us do our work in a holy manner, doing it well and for God. It will sanctify us to the measure we sanctify it, and through it others will be sanctified. Our work, thus sanctified, will take us to the company in heaven of those we celebrate today.



Commemoration of the Faithful Departed (All Souls Day, November 2)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. 1 Thess. 4: 14; 1 Cor. 15: 22 Just as Jesus died and has risen again, so through Jesus God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep; and as in Adam all die, so also in Christ will all be brought to life.

Collect Listen kindly to our prayers, O Lord, and, as our faith in your Son, raised from the dead, is deepened, so may our hope of resurrection for your departed servants also find new strength. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

All Souls Day: The Church, after celebrating the feast of All Saints, today prays for all who, in the purifying suffering of purgatory, await the day when they will join in their company. The celebration of the Mass, which re-enacts the sacrifice of Calvary, has always been the principal means by which the Church fulfils the great

commandment of charity toward the dead. We can also relieve their sufferings through our prayers, suffrages, and penances. Even after death, links with our fellow travellers are not broken.

Scripture today (Possible readings from Masses for the dead): Wisdom 3:1-9; Psalm 23:1-6;

Romans 5:5 11 or Romans 6:3 9; John 6:37 40

Jesus said, All whom the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.” (John 6:37-40)

Purgatory There have been various pictorial and literary presentations of the purification which God in his mercy has arranged for those who die in his grace, but who

are not as yet fit to abide eternally in his presence. Whosoever comes into God's presence to abide therein must be perfectly pure of sin, and it must therefore be presumed that a purgation is still required for most who are saved. This process the Church has traditionally called Purgatory. It has featured in literature and the arts. For instance, one of the great classics of world literature, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, has for its second part an extensive depiction of the *Purgatorio*. The Poet, with Virgil as his guide, ascends the terraces of the Mount of Purgatory which is inhabited by those doing penance to expiate their sins on Earth. There are the proud who are forced to circle their terrace bent double in humility. There are the slothful who run around crying out examples of zeal and sloth. The lustful are purged by fire. Dante's Purgatory is a lofty island mountain. On the lower irregular slopes are the souls whose penitence has been delayed in life and whose purgation is now extended in death. Above that is the base of Purgatory proper, the place of active purgation, which consists of seven level

terraces surrounding the mountain and rising one above another, connected by stairways in the rock. On these terraces the seven deadly sins are purged by penance from the souls who have been beset by them. On the summit of the mountain is the Garden of Eden, or Earthly Paradise, from which the purged souls ascend to Heaven. That was Dante's renowned image of the doctrine. More useful, I would suggest, is Cardinal Newman's great *Dream of Gerontius* (1865), which was set to music in 1900 by Edward Elgar as an oratorio. While Dante was a great poet, Newman was a man of holiness and original theological insight, and the *Dream* was his longest and most famous poem. The poem is a compendium of his insights into Catholic teaching on life after death. In the last part of the *Dream*, Newman depicts the judgment of the soul by God following death, and the purgatory that follows. It is a magnificent work, and all ought to read it.

Purgatory! Today, All Souls' Day, we think of and pray for all those who have died in Christ and who are being purified of the remnants and stains of sin prior to

their admittance into the eternal presence of God. In accordance with Catholic teaching, Purgatory (Latin: “purgare”, to make clean, to purify) is a place or condition of purification for those who, departing this life in God’s grace, are not entirely free from venial faults, or have not fully paid the satisfaction due to their transgressions. The faith of the Church concerning purgatory is clearly expressed in the decree of the Council of Trent which (Session XXV) defined: *“Whereas the Catholic Church, instructed by the Holy Spirit, has from the Sacred Scriptures and the ancient tradition of the Fathers taught in Councils and very recently in this Ecumenical synod (Sess. VI, cap. XXX; Sess. XXII cap.ii, iii) that there is a purgatory, and that the souls therein are helped by the suffrages of the faithful, but principally by the acceptable Sacrifice of the Altar; the Holy Synod enjoins on the Bishops that they diligently endeavour to have the sound doctrine of the Fathers in Councils regarding purgatory everywhere taught and preached, held and believed by the faithful”* (Denzinger, “Enchiridon”, 983). In *The*

Catechism of the Catholic Church, we read that “All who die in God’s grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven” (1030). The *Catechism* continues: “The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned.” The *Catechism* makes the further observation on Christ’s own words that “He who is truth (that is, Christ himself) says that whoever utters blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will be pardoned neither in this age nor in the age to come. From this sentence we understand that certain offences can be forgiven in this age, but certain others in the age to come” (1031). So whatever be the opinion of any non-Catholic Christian communion, it is the formal doctrine of the Catholic Church that, due to the mercy of God, the saved are purified from all stain of sin following death.

Let us think of the words of our Lord in today's Gospel (John 6:37 40) in relation to the Souls in Purgatory. The practical point here is that by our prayers, our Masses, and by the Indulgences we gain, we can hasten this purification of those in Purgatory. St Thomas More once wrote a powerful piece lamenting the neglect of the Souls in Purgatory. He reminded his readers that it is a great act of charity to pray for the Faithful Departed. Let us do this, then! Let us pray for our loved ones, and for the countless souls who are being purified and who have no-one to pray for them. So important is this that the Church sets aside a day every year for Masses to be celebrated across the entire universal Church for all the Souls in Purgatory. Let us make this a spiritual work of mercy which we engage in all our lives — and they will pray for us when we are there ourselves.

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Second reflection: (Isaiah 25:6.7 9)

“On this mountain he will remove the mourning veil covering all peoples” Yesterday we celebrated the Feast of All Saints, all those now with God in heaven. The sense of the Church’s liturgy is that very many are now in heaven with God. Presumably great numbers are there, and they inspire us by the fact of their being with God and they help us by their prayerful intercession. Today we think of all those who are saved, but who are not yet with God in heaven. They are being purified by God’s action in Purgatory. There may be great, perhaps unimaginable numbers, in Purgatory. Perhaps the number exceeds many times the present population of the world because we do not know how long is required for a soul to be purified after death. Let us think of all those baptised who require this purification, and all those who were not baptised but who followed their lights more or less conscientiously — implicitly desiring baptism, we may say. What numbers there may be! They cry out for our assistance — they cannot assist themselves as the possibility of acquiring

merit ceases with death. But we can merit for them, and hasten their entry into the presence of God by our prayers, Masses, penances, almsgiving, and indulgences. We know that we can help the dead because of the doctrine of the communion of the saints. Because we are in Christ, and because those in heaven are in Christ, and because those in Purgatory are in Christ, there is a great communion between us all. We can share our goods with one another. Those in heaven can help those in Christ who are as yet not there. We, here still below, can pray to those in heaven, and we can help by our prayers those who have died and who are still being purified of the stains of their sins.

Let us then resolve to help the faithful departed. Imagine how those in Purgatory who go to heaven more quickly as a result of our prayers and Masses will help us from heaven when we in our turn are in Purgatory being purified of the results of our sins. They will be our friends for we will have been their benefactors.



Feast of the Dedication of the Lateran Basilica in Rome (November 9)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Rev 21:2 I saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband.

Or:

Cf. Rev 21:3 Behold God's dwelling with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be his people, and God himself with them will be their God.

Collect O God, who from living and chosen stones prepare an eternal dwelling for your majesty, increase in your Church the spirit of grace you have bestowed, so that by new growth your faithful people may build up the heavenly Jerusalem. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Or:

O God, who were pleased to call your Church the Bride, grant that the people that serves your name may revere you, love you and follow you, and may be led by you to attain your promises in heaven. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

The Basilica of St. John Lateran is the cathedral of Rome. It was built during Constantine's reign and was consecrated by Pope St. Sylvester in 324. This feast was later made a universal celebration in honour of the basilica called "the mother and mistress of all churches of Rome and the world" (*omnium urbis et orbis ecclesiarum mater et caput*) as a sign of love for and union with the See of Peter.

Scripture today: Ezechiel 47:1-2, 8-9, 12; Psalm 46:2-3, 5-6, 8-9; 1 Corinthians 3:9c-11, 16-17; John 2:13-22

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords,

and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!” His disciples remembered that it is written: “Zeal for your house will consume me.” The Jews then responded to him, “What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” They replied, “It has taken forty six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken. (John 2:13-22)

God’s Temple One of the most characteristic institutions of society amid the plethora of cultures that have spanned the centuries is the shrine or temple. Shrines have been everywhere under countless forms and names. The waterhole was often a sacred shrine for the traditional

Australian Aborigine, and it was firmly believed that therein dwelt certain personages of the Dreaming. The native north American had his sacred shrines and sites. There were famous shrines in classical Greece. In Greek mythology, Delphi was the site of the Delphic oracle, the most important oracle in the classical Greek world. It was a major site for the worship of the god Apollo after he slew the Python — so the story went — a deity who lived there and protected the navel of the Earth. Python is claimed by some to be the original name of the site in recognition of the Python that Apollo defeated. That was Greece. The temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, also known as the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus was the most important temple in Ancient Rome, located on the Capitoline Hill. Livy also records that before the temple's construction, shrines to other gods occupied the site. When the augurs carried out the rites seeking permission to remove them, only Terminus and Juventas were believed to have refused. Their shrines were therefore incorporated into the new structure. Because he was the god of boundaries,

Terminus's refusal to be moved was interpreted as a favourable omen for the future of the Roman state. It was said that the temple of Jupiter was dedicated on September 13, about 509 BC. The original temple measured almost 60 x 60 m and was considered the most important religious temple of the whole state of Rome. The building was replaced several times over the centuries and today portions of the temple foundations can still be seen. My point is that these few examples show not only the well-nigh universal presence of the religious sense in man and society, but of its concrete manifestation in shrines, temples and in public prayer. The deities (however they are imagined) are recognized as being located in certain sacred areas where in some sense they can be approached, appeased and supplicated. They are perceived as meeting places between earth and heaven.

This tendency of man, of culture and society to create shrines and temples is, when we consider historical Revelation, entirely commendable because it is exactly what the one, true and living God directed for his chosen

people. God revealed himself to the Patriarchs in certain locations. During the years of trek in the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land, the chosen people had before them the Tabernacle where God dwelt, going before them in the pillar of cloud by day, and in the pillar of fire by night. The time came when Solomon built the Temple, which after centuries was destroyed. It was the will of God that, when the people returned from exile, it be rebuilt. There had to be the Temple where, in a special sense, God would dwell. Herod built the most magnificent Temple in all of Jerusalem's history — it took over four decades. However, some forty years after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ it too was destroyed, this time by the Romans. All that was left was a huge garbage dump, and over its ruins arose a pagan replacement. The point, though, is that in God's plan the divine Presence, while everywhere, is usually located in a special sense in certain holy buildings. Jesus Christ confirmed that his heavenly Father dwelt in the Temple of Jerusalem: it was his Father's House, and he would not tolerate its neglect and

desecration by being made the place of a thriving religious commerce (John 2:13-22). But of course, the time came for something far higher to be divinely instituted. As our Lord said to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's Well, "*the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him*" (John 4: 23). He himself is the new and definitive Temple of the living God, for in him there is the fullness of the godhead bodily. While Temples where God dwells continue to proliferate across the globe and across the centuries, the heart and soul of the worship intended by him is the Person of Jesus Christ. He, Jesus Christ, human and divine, risen from the dead, present as the Holy Eucharist, is the living heart of all the churches of his body the Church. Every member of Christ's faithful knows where God is especially dwelling here on earth. It is in the Tabernacle of the local Catholic Church. Therein is the constant and real Presence of Jesus Christ.

On the feast of the Dedication of the Lateran Basilica in Rome we think of the principal church of the See of

Rome from which the Successor of St Peter teaches and guides as bishop. As such, he teaches and guides the universal Church. We think of the real and constant Presence of Jesus Christ in that central Cathedral. It reminds us of the One who is present in the Holy Eucharist throughout the universal Church of all times and places. Let us renew our communion with the Eucharistic Jesus who is present in all our churches, and our communion with his visible vicar here on earth, the Successor of St Peter whose Cathedral we think of on November 9.

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Second reflection: (John 2:13-22)

The Lateran There are many things we can think of on the feast of the dedication of the Lateran basilica, the cathedral of the diocese of Rome. It is from that “cathedra” (teaching chair) that the Pope as Bishop of Rome teaches the faithful of his own diocese and that of the world. So we are reminded of the universal Church’s communion in the one faith taught and handed on by the successors of the Apostles in union with the successor of the Apostle Peter. The Church is a communion in the one faith. But the Church is also a great communion in prayer and worship. We are surely reminded of this when we think of the Lateran cathedral. It is a great house of God, of prayer and of worship. The entire Church worships in union with the liturgy celebrated by the Pope in his cathedral. We think then of the universal Church worshipping in the communion of one faith. Let us also remember how important is our local church where we gather to worship the Father in union with the Son with the grace of the Holy Spirit. Recall the zeal of our Lord for his

Father's house as it manifested itself in today's Gospel (John 2: 13-22): he drove out of the Temple all who were desecrating it. The Temple was the house of his Father. Our own love for our local church and the One who dwells there constantly in the Tabernacle ought lead to the utmost reverence whenever we enter it, shunning small talk and taking care that our time in His Presence is filled with prayer and union with him in the celebration of the Sacred Mysteries.

Let us be deeply aware not only of the Eucharistic Jesus who dwells there in such a lowly and humble manner, but let us remember the entire Church that continually unites herself to him as she gathers constantly in worship and prayer. The church is the great gathering place of our lives, and we are reminded of this on the feast of the dedication of the St John Lateran basilica.



Feast of St Andrew, the Apostle (November 30)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Mt 4:18-19 Beside the Sea of Galilee, the Lord saw two brothers, Peter and Andrew, and he said to them: Come after me and I will make you fishers of men.

Collect We humbly implore your majesty, O Lord, that, just as the blessed Apostle Andrew was for your Church a preacher and pastor, so he may be for us a constant intercessor before you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

SAINT ANDREW, APOSTLE Born at Bethsaida, he was a disciple of John the Baptist before he became a follower of Christ, to whom he also brought his brother, Peter. According to tradition, he preached the Gospel in Greece and in the year 60 was crucified in Patras on an X-shaped cross. He is a patron saint of Russia and Scotland.

Scripture today: Romans 10:9-18; Psalm 18;

Matthew 4:18-22

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. Come, follow me, Jesus said, and I will make you fishers of men. At once they left their nets and followed him. Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. (Matthew 4: 18-22)

Missionary Abraham is acknowledged as one of the greatest religious founders of the world. Mahomet looked to him, as do, of course, those of the Jewish and Christian religions. When we look at the biblical account of his call (Genesis 12: 1-3), we notice that embedded in it is a mission to the world. God tells Abram to go forth from

his fatherland to a land he would show him. Then God tells Moses of his plan for him: *“I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great so that you will be a blessing... and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.”* That is the mission God had set forth, to bless the earth through Abram and his posterity. *“So Abram went as the Lord directed him.”* Abram simply obeyed, and through his obedience God would bless the earth. Though there is a mission, it is God who prosecutes it and not Abram himself. Time and again in the history of God’s chosen people, there is a growing prophetic awareness of the universal mission of the children of Israel, but the people themselves do not seem to advance this universal mission actively. That is, as it were, God’s work. Their task is to remain faithful to their calling of truly belonging to the one God of Israel and of obeying his commands, and in this they very often failed. If we take a different scenario, the non-Christian religions, the pattern is similar. Take the case of Buddha — Siddhartha Gautama. The evidence of the early texts suggests that

Gautama was born in a community that was on the periphery, both geographically and culturally, of the north-eastern Indian subcontinent in the 5th century BC. He abandoned the royal life and took up the spiritual quest of seeking a permanent solution to the problem of suffering. By his mid or late thirties he had found his answer, attained enlightenment, had attracted followers and founded a monastic order. He spent the rest of his life teaching the path of awakening that he considered he had discovered, travelling throughout the north-eastern part of the Indian subcontinent, and dying at the age of 80. The great movement of Buddhism arose from him, but clearly he himself did not institute a religion of missionaries to the world.

The point here is that the general pattern with religions, including what are called world religions, is that their spread just happens. Their universal spread is not by original design nor by original impulse. Mahomet did not instantly begin a world-wide missionary movement. That aspiration came later after his own position and power and

his new religion were established in his region. But the case was very different with Jesus Christ. Our Gospel passage today is taken from St Matthew, and the public ministry of our Lord begins at the end of chapter 3, with his baptism. Thereupon, in chapter 4 and in quick succession, there is narrated the encounter with and rebuff of Satan, his departure for Galilee, and the commencement of his public ministry. From the first, Christ *actively seeks* disciples — and this is not a notable characteristic of the prophets before him. Disciples gather around the prophets, but they do not seem to have sought them out in order to make them *missionaries*. Moreover the disciples, whom Christ immediately and from the first had sought, are told that they will have a *mission to others*. This is the notable thing in our Gospel passage today. We read that Christ, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brothers — Simon and Andrew — and he called on them to follow him. Now this is not unlike the call of Abraham which was to leave all and do what God would direct. But Christ immediately announces that their call would be essentially a missionary

one. *“Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men”* (Matthew 4: 18-22). This, I think, is a distinctive feature of Jesus Christ as founder of a world religion. From the very first, he actively calls to himself disciples, members of his religion, and these disciples — from the very first — are on notice as having a share in his universal mission. It is to be a religion on the move, a religion engaged in a massive outreach, a religion for the world, and its members are to be essentially missionary like their Founder. They know from the very first that their following of Jesus Christ would involve their active and ongoing attempt to bring others to the knowledge and love of him. As disciples they would have the mission to make disciples, and just before our Lord ascended into heaven he told them just this, that this mission was to the world. *Go out to the whole world and make disciples of all the nations*, he told them.

It is an essential note of the Christian religion that it is universal and missionary. Christ’s one true Church is a universal one, and by original design has an inner impulse to spread everywhere and to be everywhere. While God

the Son was born a Hebrew, a member of God's chosen people, and while his own immediate mission was to the lost sheep of the House of Israel, his mission was to become British, Greek, German, Syrian, Chinese — through his body the Church. By his very humanity, by his Incarnation, there is a sense in which Christ has united himself to every man and woman. But of course, much more so does he do this by means of baptism — which incorporates the believer into the Church, and simultaneously into Christ. All are called to believe and be baptised. Let each of us, on the Feast of St Andrew the Apostle, take up our mission of bringing Christ to others. If we are not “missionary,” we fail in our faith.



The Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary (December 8)

Entrance Antiphon Is 61:10 I rejoice heartily in the Lord, in my God is the joy of my soul; for he has clothed me with a robe of salvation, and wrapped me in a mantle of justice, like a bride adorned with her jewels.

Collect O God, who by the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin prepared a worthy dwelling for your Son, grant, we pray, that, as you preserved her from every stain by virtue of the Death of your Son, which you foresaw, so, through her intercession, we, too, may be cleansed and admitted to your presence. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Genesis 3:9-15, 20; Psalm 98:1-4;
Ephesians 1:3-6, 11-12; Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God into a city of Galilee, called Nazareth, to a virgin

espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. The angel entered and said to her: "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women." When she heard this she was troubled at his words, and considered within herself what manner of salutation this was. And the angel said to her: "Fear not, Mary, for you have found grace with God. Behold you will conceive in thy womb and will bring forth a son; and you will call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of David his father. He will reign in the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I do not know man?" And the angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the most High will overshadow you. And so the Holy One who will be born of you will be called the Son of God. Behold your cousin Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age and she who has been called barren in now in her sixth month, because nothing is

impossible with God.” Mary said, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her. (Luke 1:26-38)

Mary Immaculate The Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of St Matthew is striking if only for the space it occupies in that Gospel. It extends for some 111 verses and embraces a wide spectrum of Christ’s teaching. That teaching is mainly, though not exclusively, moral teaching: what we must *do*. But there is an even longer presentation of the teaching of Jesus Christ in the Gospels, and that is the Last Supper discourse in the Gospel of St John. If we take that discourse as beginning with the words of Christ at the washing of the feet (John 13: 8), and including (because of the teaching contained therein) his prayer to his heavenly Father (ch.17), this presentation of teaching exceeds the Sermon on the Mount by some forty verses, which is much more than a typical chapter. Moreover, it is considerably doctrinal — as well as being moral. The discourse of the Last Supper, for instance, obviously has far more on the doctrine of the Holy Trinity than the

Sermon on the Mount — and this stands to reason. The discourse is the record of our Lord's words to the Twelve at the end of his public ministry and in a private and intimate setting, whereas the Sermon on the Mount is public and is situated early in his ministry. One area of its richness in doctrine are those passages that speak of “*another Advocate*” who will be given (14: 16), the “*Holy Spirit*” (14: 26), the “*Spirit of truth*” (16: 13). This other “Advocate” whom Jesus will ask the Father to send, will “abide with you forever.” He is “the Spirit of truth” who will “be in you” (14:16-17). We read a little further on that this “Holy Spirit” will “teach you all things, and will remind you of all that I have told you” (14:26). The very Gospel in which this is recorded is one fruit of this gift of the Holy Spirit. However, it is to be noticed that Christ does not formally restrict the teaching action of the Holy Spirit to the writing and interpretation of the Scriptures. In the persons of the Apostles, it is the *Church* that receives the Holy Spirit. The *Church* will be taught and reminded by the Holy Spirit of what Jesus revealed. The *Church* will

be empowered to remember, to understand, and to explain the Faith more fully.

Thus will the Church's doctrine be able to develop. Let us ponder this point carefully. At the Last Supper Christ promised the Apostles that, at his request, the Father would send to them the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth. He will teach them all things, and remind them of what he has told them. The Church, as led by the authoritative guidance of the Apostles and their successors, will advance in its grasp and recollection of Christ's teaching and its implications. This developing perception and explanation of what was received from the lips of Christ will be protected and guided by Christ's gift, the Spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit. Thus we must expect a *development of doctrine* — not new revelations, but a development of the Church's understanding and teaching of what Christ taught. For instance, in our Gospel today (Luke 1:26-38) St Luke gives us the Angel's address to the Virgin Mary. He speaks to her as one who is "*full of grace.*" "*The Lord is with you.*" Christ's faithful take cognisance of how the

Church has formally remembered the Mother of the Lord, and how the Church has come to understand the Virgin Mary's gifts and privileges. They know that this memory and this advancing understanding is guided by the Holy Spirit. They know that our knowledge of divine revelation is not restricted nor exclusively derived from our reading and personal interpretation of the Scriptures. We read the inspired Scriptures as members of Christ's Church, and the Church as such is aided by the Holy Spirit in her memory, her understanding, and her own reading of the Scriptures which she herself produced. Thus has the Church seen with a divine clarity and gift that the Virgin Mary was truly full of grace, and was this from the first instant of her life to its very end. She was never in sin. She was conceived immaculate, and in this holy state she ever remained, advancing in an astonishing holiness that is the praise and glory of God. This is the faith of the Church. It is a formal perception and teaching which is an instance of that promise made to her by Christ, that she would be taught "*all things*" and reminded of "*all that I told you.*"

The Holy Spirit is the guarantor of the development of the Church's doctrine in history. The Church teaches that it is divinely revealed that the Virgin Mary was conceived free from all sin due to the merits of her future Son our Redeemer. It was a singular and unique grace by which God prepared a fitting mother for his ineffable Son. That grace did not come from nowhere — it was a grace stemming retrospectively from the future Sacrifice of her Redeemer, Jesus Christ her Son and her Lord. He thus had a perfect mother, and he has entrusted us to her. Let us place ourselves in the keeping of her prayers, looking on her as our Model and our Help.



Our Lady of Guadalupe (December 12)

Entrance Antiphon Revelation 12:1 A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.

Collect O God, Father of mercies, who placed your people under the singular protection of your Son's most holy Mother, grant that all who invoke the Blessed Virgin of Guadalupe, may seek with ever more lively faith the progress of peoples in the ways of justice and of peace. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

(December 12) Our Lady of Guadalupe (Mexico)

The feast in honour of Our Lady of Guadalupe goes back to the sixteenth century. Chronicles of that period tell us the story. A poor Indian named Cuauhtlatohuac was baptized and given the name Juan Diego. He was a 57-

year-old widower and lived in a small village near Mexico City. On Saturday morning, December 9, 1531, he was on his way to a nearby barrio to attend Mass in honour of Our Lady. He was walking by a hill called Tepeyac when he heard beautiful music like the warbling of birds. A radiant cloud appeared and within it a young Native American maiden dressed like an Aztec princess. The lady spoke to him in his own language and sent him to the bishop of Mexico, a Franciscan named Juan de Zumarraga. The bishop was to build a chapel in the place where the lady appeared. When Juan Diego opened his tilma (a type of outer garment or cape worn by Aztec men) in the bishop's presence, the roses fell to the ground and the bishop sank to his knees. On Juan Diego's tilma appeared an image of Mary as she had appeared at the hill of Tepeyac. It was December 12, 1531.

Mary said to Juan Diego: "My dearest son, I am the eternal Virgin Mary, Mother of the true God, Author of Life, Creator of all and Lord of the Heavens and of the Earth...and it is my desire that a church be built here in this

place for me, where, as your most merciful Mother and that of all your people, I may show my loving clemency and the compassion that I bear to the Indians, and to those who love and seek me...” (from an ancient chronicle). Juan Diego is now a canonized saint.

Scripture today: Zechariah 2:14-17 or Revelation 11:19a; 12:1-6a, 10ab; Judith 13:18bcde, 19; Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with you. Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob

for ever; his kingdom will never end. How will this be, Mary asked the angel, since I am a virgin? The angel answered, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God. I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered. May it be to me as you have said. Then the angel left her. (Luke 1:26-38)

Full of grace I once saw a dog-show, and there paraded before the judge a range of dogs of various breeds and physiques. They were all impressive. Which of them won the prize? It was the smallest of them, the one least likely to have been noticed by the spectators. That smallest dog was judged to be the best of them because of its general proportion, appearance and the other qualities the judges look for in such an event. In its case, *small* was beautiful. Take the mighty Amazon jungle — consider the range of wild-life, fauna and vegetal life. Consider the

towering trees of the Amazon, many of which have been growing for centuries and pumping oxygen into the earth's atmosphere. They can be breathtakingly impressive — but the small plant can outstrip them in beauty, proportion and intricacy. Size and the capacity to command attention is not the yardstick of inner quality — but human beings tend to think that it is. I once saw a local member of parliament who represented a rural electorate driving around in his car. Splashed across each side of his car in large script was his own surname. It certainly succeeded in gaining attention, in riveting the imagination and, I suppose, in giving the impression to observers that the one driving the car was a person of personal quality, and that he ought be regarded highly. That is to say, the assumption was that *large* is beautiful. It is striking how often the financially successful person is adulated. A person who builds up a great commercial empire, or even a company that grows and outclasses its competitors, has the instinctive support of very many — we all like to see a winner. Large is beautiful, and who cares about the ordinary person, the

little fellow, the one with not much to show for himself in terms of influence, achievements and possessions! All this is to say that, because we are to a considerable extent creatures of sense, we tend to go on appearances. Our tendency is to think that the only persons who matter are those who loom large, *because* they loom large.

As a counter to this mistake of thinking that large is beautiful and that bigger is better in just about everything, the British economist E.F. Schumacher published in 1973 his widely acclaimed book, *Small Is Beautiful: Economics As If People Mattered*. The Times Literary Supplement ranked *Small Is Beautiful* among the 100 most influential books published since World War II. At least this showed its need in the field of economics. But we can take the point and apply it to human beings: the *little* person can be much better. But whether big or small, the decisive question is — what does *God* think? What has God revealed by his interventions in the flow of history? What matters for mankind, God has shown, are not the big people, nor as such, the little people. What matters is that

people *do his will*. The most important people in the long run, the ones who serve the world best, are those who hear the word of God and put it into practice. It might be a king who does this (like St Louis of France, or St Edward the Confessor, or St Henry of Germany and Holy Roman Emperor) or an obscure peasant girl (like St Maria Goretti), but the most significant thing about him or her will have been submission to God and his holy will. All this brings us to our Gospel passage today (Luke 1:26-38), chosen by the Church for the Feast of our Lady of Guadalupe. After Jesus Christ who died a seemingly miserable death by crucifixion, the most important person in the history of the world was his mother, who during her lifetime was relatively unnoticed — except, of course, by the disciples of her incomparable and glorious Son. We know of her peerless importance because it has been revealed to us and taught by the Church. But what was the secret of her greatness? It was that she was *full of grace* and that the *Lord*, in every possible sense, was *with her*. She was the servant of the Lord, absolutely and beyond compare.

Whatever God wanted, her answer was, “*May it be to me, according to your word.*” Thus has God raised her on high as Mother and Queen in heaven and on earth. Today we think of one of her most remarkable interventions from heaven. It occurred in Mexico in the sixteenth century — in it, she spoke with one of the *little ones*, St Juan Diego.

Let us ever gaze on Mary, the mother of God. She shows us what is important in life and in the history of the world, because she is the first and foremost Christian. *Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you! Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus! Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen!* God deals with the great and the small, but what matters is that each be like the mother of his incarnate Son. She believed and obeyed, and did so perfectly.



Feast of St Stephen, proto-martyr (December 26)

Entrance Antiphon The gates of heaven were opened for blessed Stephen, who was found to be first among the number of the Martyrs and therefore is crowned triumphant in heaven.

Collect Grant, Lord, we pray, that we may imitate what we worship, and so learn to love even our enemies, for we celebrate the heavenly birthday of a man who knew how to pray even for his persecutors. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

(December 26) Saint Stephen, first martyr (d. 36 A.D.?) St. Stephen was a deacon in the early Church and was the first Christian martyred for his faith. He was one of the seven deacons who helped the apostles (Acts 6:1-6) and was “filled with faith and with the Holy Spirit,” and was “full of fortitude” (Acts 6:5, 8). Stephen died praying for his executioners. The similarities between Stephen’s

martyrdom and the crucifixion of Our Lord emphasize his imitation of Christ even unto the complete gift of self. His name is included in the Roman Canon.

Scripture today: Acts 6:8-10;7:54-59; Psalm 30;

Matthew 10:17-22

Be on your guard; you will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. “Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. (Matthew 10: 17-22)

Man’s End Innate in everything is the drive or impulse for security and some form of flourishing: we may

even call it, by analogy, a “quest for happiness.” The cactus plant possesses its distinctive mechanism of security — its *spines*. Living, as most cacti do, in extremely dry environments with little vegetation to hide it, the cactus would be highly exposed to any kind of attack — but it has its spines that assist it in its flourishing. As a matter of fact, these spines also help secure it from water loss by reducing air flow close to the cactus and providing some shade. The cactus, like everything else, “seeks” its “happiness”, as we might express it. It has its mechanisms to protect this drive towards its betterment and perfection. This also serves other things — a higher purpose, as we might regard it. For instance, many species of cacti are very beautiful and are used as ornamental plants. Tiny ones grow in small pots and live almost effortlessly on window-sills of homes. Others are grown for fodder or forage, and at times their fruit is used. Cochineal is the product of an insect that lives on some cacti. But of course, like all other things, the cactus is subject to threat, attack and destruction — but this is often for the advantage

of other things. If its death is natural, its remains will normally nourish the earth and serve its vitality. If it has been attacked in some way and consumed by another living thing, it has served the cycle of life, as might, in turn, its attacker too. What I am saying, by reference to this one example, is that while all things seek their security and happiness, they are unavoidably exposed to radical threats of one kind or another. But when they do succumb, this has not necessarily been a meaningless frustration and oblivion, but may serve a purpose higher than themselves. Now, when it comes to the pinnacle of the universe, which is man, he too will strive to “flourish”, and he too is ever subject to radical threat and inevitable death. But he has been endowed with his own mind and his own power to choose. Because of this, his desire for happiness and flourishing may or may not serve his own true happiness and that of others. His decline and destruction may or may not serve a higher purpose. Jesus Christ is the pre-eminent example of the former, while, say, Judas Iscariot may be

taken as an instance of the latter. What we must do is choose well — truly well.

The greatest choice that can be made, indeed the choice for which we have been made — the choice for which each of us was chosen before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4) — is the choice for Christ. When Jesus Christ, risen from the dead and about to ascend to the right hand of his heavenly Father, gave his disciples his final instructions, they amounted to one thing. Within that one thing was contained all else which the infant Church and the Church of the ages, guided by the Spirit of God, would transmit and explicate. *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me; you, therefore, must go out, making disciples of all nations, and baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all the commandments which I have given you. And behold, I am with you through the days that are coming, until the consummation of the world”* (Matthew 28: 18-20). This is the true flourishing of man, his means of happiness, his fulfilment. It is the means by

which he serves the greatest of purposes which is the glory of God and the salvation of man. Indeed, it is through this means, which is to say by his being totally a disciple and friend of Jesus Christ, that the world itself attains its true flourishing and betterment. In man, man in union with Jesus Christ and his body the Church, the world attains its divinely-intended end. But like all things, man is ever subject to radical threat. The special and distinctive threat to the disciple of Christ is that which bore down on the Master himself: difficulties because of his witness to the truth. Of this, our Lord himself spoke and we think of his words on the feast of the first martyr, St Stephen the deacon. *“Be on your guard; you will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles.”* But Christ promises that whatever be the threat to the one who has made the choice for him and stands by it, aid from above will be given to him: *“But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be*

given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”

Indeed, for such as these, all will ultimately be well: *“Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved”* (Matthew 10: 17-22). This is the true basis of security, happiness, flourishing and the attainment of the highest fruit. Jesus Christ and his love is the true end of man, and the martyrdom of St Stephen who died bearing witness to Jesus illustrates this. Jesus Christ came to bring us life, and true life is gained by living and dying in him and for him.



Feast of St John the Evangelist (December 27)

Entrance Antiphon This is John, who reclined on the Lord's breast at supper, the blessed Apostle, to whom celestial secrets were revealed and who spread the words of life through all the world.

Or:

Cf. Sir 15: 5 In the midst of the Church he opened his mouth, and the Lord filled him with the spirit of wisdom and understanding and clothed him in a robe of glory.

Collect O God, who through the blessed Apostle John have unlocked for us the secrets of your Word, grant, we pray, that we may grasp with proper understanding what he has so marvellously brought to our ears. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

(December 27) St John the beloved disciple From Bethsaida in Galilee, St John was called to follow Christ from mending the nets. He became the "one Jesus loved."

He wrote the fourth Gospel, three Letters and the Apocalypse. He is the evangelist of the divinity of Christ and of fraternal love. He was one of the three witnesses of the transfiguration of Christ, and is referred to by St Paul as one of the pillars of the infant Church in Jerusalem. Christ entrusted his mother to his care during his last moments on the Cross. In later years he was exiled to Patmos.

Scripture today: 1 John 1:1-4; Psalm 97:1-2, 5-6, 11-12;
John 20:1a and 2-8

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him! So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as

well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (John 20:1a and 2-8)

Right dispositions Each of the four Gospels, of course, report the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and they do it in different ways. Matthew's Gospel has 28 chapters, and the last, consisting of 20 verses, is given to the Resurrection account. Mark's Gospel has 16 chapters, and the last, consisting of 20 verses is given to the Resurrection. The two accounts have similarities. Luke's account is more than twice the length of each, with 53 verses given to the Resurrection. It is vivid and more extensive in its detail, and in various respects rather unlike the narrative of both Matthew and Mark. Our Gospel passage for the Feast of St John is drawn from the Gospel of St John. In what might have been the original conclusion of the Gospel (that is, chapter 20), 31 verses are given to the Resurrection appearances in the vicinity of

Jerusalem. In the last chapter (21), perhaps a subsequent addition to John's Gospel, there are a further 25 verses on the Resurrection appearance at the Sea of Tiberius in Galilee. All up, therefore, the Gospel of St John provides us with the fullest account of the Resurrection. Further, this account is notable for its living and concrete detail — and in this respect is like that of Luke. Luke informs us that the women told the Apostles what the Angels had said to them, and that the Apostles did not believe. Some Greek manuscripts add the detail (in verse 12) that Peter *“arose and ran to the tomb, and stooping down, could see nothing but the wrappings — so he went away full of amazement at what had happened.”* Other manuscripts (as in the Nestle Version) do not have this report at all, but it is taken up by John in his Gospel and given vivid detail. It is this event which we have in our Gospel today. Yes, Peter did run to the tomb as Luke describes, but there was more to it than this. John accompanied his older friend, and both sprinted from their dwelling in Jerusalem to the burial place outside the City. It was early, and still dark — perhaps not

absolutely dark, for the women had been to the tomb and back. Through the streets they ran, hearts pounding. Both ran at full capacity, the younger man perhaps barely out of his teens outstripping the older. The body of Jesus their Master had gone!

Today we think of John the Apostle and Evangelist. But in his Gospel, John insists that we think of him as associated with Simon Peter. Reaching the tomb first, he looked inside and saw the burial wrappings on the ground, as if this detail were important. Peter arrived and immediately entered the tomb, and likewise saw the wrappings — with this addition, that he also saw the piece of cloth which had covered the head of Jesus — it was rolled up in a place by itself. It is to be noted that the sight by both Apostles of the burial wrappings on the ground is given a certain importance. After Peter, the other disciple went in and, we are solemnly told, “*he saw and he believed.*” It looks as if the detail about the burial cloths had something to do with his *believing*, for the intriguing mention of the former immediately precedes the latter. It

might also suggest that the significance of these burial cloths and their position was perceived by Christians in the ambience of John's influence. At least it shows that John considered they would understand it. I say this because there is no further explanation in the text — as if John considered that the reader would understand the connection between seeing the cloths inside of the tomb and believing. Be all this as it may, John “*saw*” and in some sense “*he believed.*” He saw something, something about the empty tomb and the cloths, that led him to believe — perhaps while still requiring the later appearances. Nevertheless, belief in the living Jesus had replaced the terrible vacuum of his loss. There was no longer a vast void, and this on the basis of his having seen the empty tomb with the wrappings. I cannot help but wonder whether John was pointing out to his reader that, even though he had not yet seen the glorious Jesus in the flesh, even though he had but seen the empty tomb and the wrappings, even though he had seen only some indications — some “evidence,” we might say — still, that indication *sufficed* for some belief.

That is to say, the knowledge that Jesus has risen does not require the *physical sight* of him that John himself was subsequently granted. What is critically important is the *prior disposition* of soul that will enable the hearer to judge correctly the significance of the Gospel narrative.

At the end of this chapter, John writes that he has recorded the “signs” performed by Jesus in the presence of his disciples, and this recording of them was meant to help the reader believe in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God. By and large we have “signs” to go on, “signs” brought to us by the entirely credible witness and testimony of the Church. We do not have a mathematical demonstration. But these “signs,” if received by one who has the right dispositions of mind, heart and soul, can bring him to absolute certitude, a true faith in Jesus Christ and his Resurrection as being a most certain and objective fact. On this feast of St John the Evangelist and Apostle, let us resolve to make his loving dispositions our own.

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Second reflection: (1 John 1:1-4)

John's Reverence for Jesus

The fourth Gospel denotes St John as the beloved disciple — the “*disciple whom Jesus loved.*” St John was profoundly aware of the special friendship our Lord showed him. This was not to claim that *he himself* loved our Lord *more* than all the others — in fact Our Lord expected Simon Peter to love him more than all the others (“*Simon, do you love me more than these others?*”). Nevertheless, throughout the Gospel, John is described as the one whom *Jesus* loved somehow in a special manner. What do we see John saying about this? It is clear from his first Letter that he was always profoundly moved by the thought of Who it was who had granted to him the privilege of this special intimacy. It was the Word, the Word made flesh, the Word of God who is life. He had granted to him and to each of them that they could see him, watch him, touch him and be in union with him — with him who is the Word of life! St John's profound love and

reverence for the exalted Person of Jesus shines through his inspired writings, his Letters, his Gospel, and the Apocalypse.

Let us take our cue from John in this respect, and strive to grow in a profound appreciation for who Jesus is. Let us never take Jesus for granted or underestimate him. Jesus gives himself in all intimacy to us, though he is Almighty God. Let this lead us to reverence and love for him, and with this attitude let us bring him to others.



Feast of the Holy Innocents (December 28)

Entrance Antiphon The innocents were slaughtered as infants for Christ; spotless, they follow the Lamb and sing for ever: Glory to you, O Lord.

Collect O God, whom the Holy Innocents confessed and proclaimed on this day, not by speaking but by dying, grant, we pray, that the faith in you which we confess with our lips may also speak through our manner of life. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

(December 28) The Holy Innocents: The Church celebrates the memory of the small children of the neighbourhood of Bethlehem. They were put to death by Herod, who was seeking to kill Jesus. These innocent children bear witness to Christ to a world which would not receive him.

Scripture today: 1 John 1:5-2:2; Psalm 124:2-3, 4-5, 7cd-8; Matthew 2: 13-18

When the Wise Men had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. Get up, he said, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him. So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: Out of Egypt I called my son. When Herod realised that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more. (Matthew 2: 13-18)

Suffering Despite the theories of some that the Bethlehem of Judea was not the site of Christ's birth (because of a perceived lack of archaeological evidence), but the Bethlehem of Galilee (or Zebulun), the clear assertion of the Gospels is overwhelming. As Jerome Murphy O'Connor has argued, the authoritative testimony of Matthew and Luke — independent of each other — is supported by the extremely well supported tradition of the cave of Bethlehem, known to have been the site of Christ's birth. The cave is mentioned by Justin Martyr, and by the second century A.D. author of the *Protoevangelium of James*. It is later mentioned by Origen (185-254 A.D.), who reports that “*there is shown at Bethlehem the cave where he [Jesus] was born.*” The cave apparently attracted regular visitors, including Origen himself sometime between 231 and 246 A.D. St Jerome (342-420 A.D.), who lived in Bethlehem from 386 A.D. until his death, informs us that “*From Hadrian's time [135 A.D.] until the reign of Constantine, for about 180 years*” the cave had been converted into a shrine dedicated to Adonis. He states that

“Bethlehem (is) now ours, and the earth’s, most sacred spot..” The fact that there are few archaeological remains of the Bethlehem of the time of Christ’s birth suggests it was but a small village, though hallowed in the minds of the chosen people because of David the great king, and because of the prophecy connecting it with the Messiah. So we may imagine a small, quiet village — disturbed somewhat at the time of the census because of the influx of descendants of David. These included Joseph, accompanied by Mary his betrothed who was with child. The census passed, and the quiet humdrum of life at Bethlehem resumed, with Joseph staying on, earning his living by his trade. Perhaps they dwelt in the cave where Christ was born. But suddenly and quietly, perhaps after dusk or before dawn, a party with purpose in the face arrived, and immediately set to work. From house to house or from farm to farm they went, and the infants, perhaps just a small number as it would have been a small village, were summarily dispatched. The terrible bloodthirsty business was soon all over, and the visitors slipped away.

But Joseph had suddenly gone, with Mary his betrothed and the precious Child. Herod's people had arrived, but Joseph was already out of the village and on his way towards Egypt. Behind them was a grief-stricken village, uncomprehending, completely bewildered at the terrible turn of events. The crime did not make it to the annals of history in the way other assassinations by Herod did. Nevertheless, it was a tragedy of immense proportions for the small number who bore it. They did not understand why this had been visited upon them, for there would have been no explanation. They were innocent, and doubtless the families thus afflicted were God-fearing members of the chosen people. Evil and suffering had descended upon them, and for no apparent reason. It was a terrible mystery, the mystery of evil — a pattern to be seen all through human history. There are evils that people bring upon themselves because of their mistakes or their moral decline. Napoleon Bonaparte's cascading troubles at the end of his arrogant dominance of Europe were brought on by himself. Everyone can think of troubles they have

brought on themselves. But there are others that are not. There are people who are blessed with fortune when they do not deserve it, and there are others who are afflicted with evil and suffering when they do not deserve it. We may take the murder of the Holy Innocents as a paradigm of all those innocents who suffer — even the ultimate deprivation, that of life itself — when they do not deserve it. What is to be made of it? The Innocents and their families did not know that they were suffering *because of* hatred for Christ, the Messiah. But in fact, theirs was a privileged position in the eyes of God. It is a privilege to suffer because of hatred for Christ, as our Lord himself makes clear. But they did not know that this was their case, and in any event, they had no choice in the matter. Notwithstanding this, their being snuffed out had a place in the divine plan. All is in the hands of God our Father — not a hair falls from our head without our heavenly Father knowing it, our Lord reassures us. Whatever happens to us, if it is not the fruit of our sin, and if permitted by God,

will have its place in the providence of God. He, the loving Creator, will bring good out of our suffering.

There are so many things in life that frustrate our plans, including our plans for serving God. We have perhaps hoped for so many things, and so many of them have come to nothing despite our best intentions. Evil, disappointment and suffering have come our way, and it may have been due to injustice or the thoughtlessness of others. Let us cast it all into the hands of the Lord, knowing that he is mightier than any other force that might seem to crush us. He can bring forth the fruit he intends. Let us take the Holy Innocents, celebrated as martyrs of the Church, as our inspiration.

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Second reflection: (Matthew 2:13-18)

The mystery of evil

Consider how the lives of these infants were suddenly snuffed out, and terrible suffering brought to their families. It appeared to have no meaning. While God could have prevented Herod from this murderous deed, mysteriously he did not. This sudden evil would have seemed a terrible mystery. Yet the Church reveres and celebrates these children as martyrs. So there was a meaning to their deaths, though they and their families had no idea of what that meaning was. They mysteriously and unconsciously bore witness to Christ in all innocence, showing to human history his sovereignty and the unique Kingdom that Herod was trying to do away with. This ought help us to believe, if not to understand, that whatever be the evils that visit us there will be a meaning and purpose in it provided we endeavour to do God's will. While those infants were not consciously trying to do God's will, in their innocence they were unconsciously doing it. Evil came upon them,

unasked and not understood, and their deaths are seen by the Church as having great value, the value of a hidden Christian martyrdom. Their deaths as martyrs will be celebrated by the Church till the end of the world.

We may be ignored, and circumstances or people may afflict us or sweep us away into unjust oblivion, and all for no apparent reason. Yet God has allowed it. He will know the value of a course of life so marked by apparent meaninglessness. Let us but be found doing his will, and all will be well.



Holy Family (Sunday within the Octave of Christmas)

Entrance Antiphon Lk 2: 16 The shepherds went in haste, and found Mary and Joseph and the Infant lying in a manger.

Collect O God, who were pleased to give us the shining example of the Holy Family, graciously grant that we may imitate them in practicing the virtues of family life and in the bonds of charity, and so, in the joy of your house, delight one day in eternal rewards. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14; Psalm 128:1-5;

Colossians 3:12-21; Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

After the Magi had departed, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph, saying: "Arise, and take the child and his mother, and fly into Egypt and remain there until I tell you. Herod will seek the child to destroy him." Joseph arose and took the child and his mother by

night and retired into Egypt. He was there until the death of Herod in order that it might be fulfilled what the Lord had said by the prophet: Out of Egypt have I called my son. When Herod died an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt saying: “Arise, and take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel. Those who sought the life of the child are dead.” Joseph arose and took the child and his mother and came into the land of Israel. But hearing that Archelaus reigned in Judea in place of Herod his father he was afraid to go there. Being warned in a dream he retired to Galilee. There he dwelt in a town called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was said by prophets: He shall be called a Nazarene. (Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23)

The Holy Family One of the features of our age that has come into general view is the sad state of married life. There is a tremendous instability within very many marriages, and divorce rates have been high for years. This has a variety of causes, and many who suffer the trauma of a breakdown of marriage can in no way be blamed — in

fact for some, a civil divorce is the only practicable course for them to take. Their spouse may have been incapable of making a true decision in the first place, or may have lacked other essential qualities for entering the married state. The result is a trail of tears. I remember seeing a programme on television featuring a young woman who showed some beautiful moral qualities. She had had a hard upbringing because of the behaviour of her father. She said on the programme that as a result of this she intended never to marry — what she had seen in her own family destroyed her confidence in marriage as a path to happiness. The beauty and possibilities of God's plan for marriage have been obscured for many people, due in considerable measure to the gradual transformation of culture. The culture of the West — so influential in the modern age — has become secular. Religion, and specifically the Christian religion, has been relegated to the margins of mere personal opinion. Its norms are not taken to be objective. This assumption seeps into the springs of

individual life, and it also has an effect on public law and morality. Accordingly, there are attacks in society and in the media on marriage as a sacrosanct natural institution, let alone as a divine institution sanctioned by Revelation. Forces press for the recognition, as marriages, of unions between persons that are profoundly sinful in the sight of God. In particular, the obfuscation of the idea of freedom sways national legislatures into passing laws that in fact encourage the breakdown of marriage and family life. Somehow there has to be the recapturing of a different model and idea of man, and in particular of the human family. That model is found in the Person of Jesus Christ, and in the most holy family of which he was part.

There was a family in history that, in the plan of divine providence, is or should be the model and inspiration for all families for all time. It is the Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. It was a humble, obscure and seemingly very ordinary family, so like the vast majority of families throughout history. It was part of a tiny backwater village in the obscurity of a tiny corner of the Roman

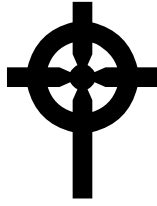
Empire. Its life and activities were made up of what most people would call the ordinary things of every day. Everyone can relate to that family. Everyone can say, that family was in many respects like mine. So what it suggests, I can take to heart. I can learn from it and profit by contemplating it continuously and deeply. Now, there is a simple key to the understanding of the inner life of this family of Nazareth — it is holiness. The holiness of this seemingly ordinary family was incomparable, incalculable, and barely imaginable in its height, extent and depth. This Family teaches us the true source of grandeur, and that every family is meant by God to be the home and the school of holiness. In holiness, the family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph was perfect. It is an enthralling and fascinating thought that in the midst of this family was a Man who is the all-holy God. He, the incarnate God, God become man, subjected himself in loving obedience to his utterly sinless mother, sinless from conception to the end of life. He subjected himself also to his foster-father, Joseph, the spouse of Mary his mother. How holy Joseph was! His

intimacy with Jesus was constant, protracted, and after Mary his spouse, unique. If our ambitions for family life are largely in the direction of financial and social success, or some other goal connected with merely temporal happiness, the Holy Family will not seem to offer much. Indeed, it will not seem of relevance at all. But if our ambitions are those of God himself, namely moral and spiritual perfection, the perfection in our hearts and lives of the love of God and neighbour, then the Holy Family will be appreciated as an extraordinary phenomenon in history. In the sight of God and of all heaven, the Holy Family shines out with immense brilliance because of its moral and spiritual life, its holiness and its love. Yet all this was beneath a simple, humble and obscure appearance, in an obscure and morally very imperfect village community.

Gazing on the holy family in our prayer, let us ask ourselves, what is it that is truly important for my family? The important thing for my family is union with God, attained by living in union with Jesus, Mary and Joseph. So then, let us resolve as families to live in their presence

day by day. The Christian family that lives in the presence of that Holy Family will pray for a share in its holiness. It is to holiness that all of Christ's faithful, and every Christian family, are called. This holiness was lived perfectly by the Holy Family, and the Holy Family gives this holiness to the family that tries to live in imitation of it. The desire to love God and one another is a great grace from God, but in so many families there is little of that desire. Let us have the ambition this coming year of modelling our family on the Holy Family, not just as a pious thought, but as something we live out in daily action.





Special Occasions



Day of the Nation (eg., Australia Day, January 26)

Entrance Antiphon I will praise you, Lord, among the peoples, among the nations sing psalms to you, for your mercy reaches to the heavens, and your truth to the skies.

Collect Grant, we pray, O Lord our God, that as the Cross shines in our southern skies, so may Christ being light to our nation, to its peoples old and new, and by saving grace, transform our lives. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

(January 26) On Australia Day the citizens come together as a nation to celebrate the nation, its culture and its history. It is the day to reflect on what has been achieved and the blessings that are the source of gratitude and national pride. It is the day for all to re commit themselves to making Australia an even better place for the future. Australia Day, 26 January, is the anniversary of the arrival of the First Fleet of 11 convict ships from Great Britain, and the raising of the Union Jack at Sydney Cove by its

commander Captain Arthur Phillip, in 1788. Though 26 January marks this specific event, Australia Day celebrations reflect contemporary Australia: its diverse society and landscape, its remarkable achievements and its future. It is an opportunity to reflect on the nation's history, and to consider how Australia can be made a better place in future.

Scripture today: Isaiah 32:15-18; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11
or Romans 12:9-13; Matthew 5:1-12

Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of

God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5: 1-12)

The Fatherland Some have said that the Ten Commandments are a revealed teasing-out of the precepts of the natural law. That is to say, they are a divine confirmation, and a making specific, of what man's own reason, when functioning as it should and at its best, will tell him he should do. That he should worship the one true God, that he ought respect his holy name, hallow his festivals, and respect his neighbour in the ways set forth in the Ten Commandments, all stand to reason. We could discuss this proposition — for myself, I am not sure that the Ten Commandments can be reduced to the natural law, even though they include it and sanction it. They surpass it too, in various respects. That point aside, consider one of

the Ten: the Fourth, in which we are commanded to honour our father and mother. How much society depends on the observance of this moral requirement, and yet how frequently it is neglected and positively violated! Of course, it is subject to the First Commandment, which commands us to acknowledge and obey God above all. We have something of an instance of this priority in the life of our Lord when, as a youth, he stayed behind in Jerusalem even though it caused distress to his mother and foster-father. *“Did you not know I must be about my Father’s affairs?”* he said to them. But then he returned to Nazareth with them and was *subject to their authority*. During his public ministry Christ condemned the religious leaders for, in effect, nullifying the honour and care to be rendered to parents by their rule of Corban. According to the Gospel account, a son could say to his parents: *“What you would have gained from me is Corban — that is, given to God.”* In this way his duty to honour and care for his father or mother was set aside. The Fourth Commandment, requiring that man honour his father and his mother, is a

fundamental law of nature on which so much peace and happiness depends. It is a law of nature that God has raised to the rank of a revealed law: He himself has specifically commanded it to be observed. But now, the Church has long taught that this commandment applies *beyond* the context of family life, because there are various ways in which we are parented. The Church herself is our mother, and gives us the gift of supernatural life by her ministry and Sacraments. She nurtures this life. The Fourth Commandment therefore includes our love for the *Church*. We should obey her in matters religious and spiritual, and honour and support her, for she is our mother in the Lord.

There is a further application of this very important precept of revealed and natural law, and that is in reference to our own society and nation. With good reason our own nation is called *the fatherland*, or *the motherland*. From it we receive our culture, our education, and all that which normally we love. Unless our fatherland unjustly turns against us and persecutes us for our exercise of legitimate

rights such as our freedom to worship, we will naturally love our fatherland. Usually despite the persecution, we will still love our fatherland as such, and distinguish it from the particular government commanding its resources. Just as the divine command to honour our parents applies to our attitude to the Church, so too it applies to our attitude to our country. God wants us to honour, love and respect our country, our fatherland, and this is to be translated into a respect for and promotion of its just laws. If it institutes laws that violate the primary Commandment, which is that the Lord alone is God and that his will must always be obeyed, then those laws cannot be obeyed. A civil law that sanctions — or even, as in China at this point in history, routinely requires — abortion, cannot be allowed and must be appropriately resisted. This brings us to the next point, that love for one's country impels the Christian to bear witness to Jesus Christ and his will for man. In the first half of the sixteenth century King Henry VIII of England, by royal decrees and the abject subservience of parliament, took England out of the

Church, the nation's spiritual mother. He declared himself to be in the Pope's place — the Church's visible head. Laws were enacted enforcing this. It meant that many, protesting their love for the sovereign and for their country, were set on a course in which the higher law of God was to be obeyed. St Thomas More went to the scaffold declaring himself to be the King's good servant, but *God's first*. His life was a shining example of the observance of the fourth commandment. Thomas More honoured his own parents; he honoured and obeyed the Church in her proper sphere; he honoured and obeyed his sovereign and country; but in everything and above all he obeyed *God*. For this reason, his love for and service to his country was magnificent.

Today we celebrate our national day. It is a day when we think of our motherland. Honour her, the law of God stipulates, for she has parented you in so many ways. Do all you can to support her and to obey her in her just and proper sphere. Above all and in everything, obey God and bring to your country the greatest of all God's blessings, the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ. He is the

Redeemer of man, our Saviour and our God. The more your country honours, loves and serves God, and in particular God in the Person of Jesus Christ, the richer and fuller will be her life. Let us pray for our country and do all we can to make her pleasing in the sight of God.

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A second reflection: On religion With the exception of modern western culture and the cultures it has influenced, one of the most obvious features of human history is the prominence of *religion*. Man is properly defined as a rational animal, but in view of his history many have preferred to define him as a religious animal. Man has striven to attain involvement with the unseen world, to gain acceptance by it, and to be saved from evil by it, and this quest has pervaded his cultures. The Letter to the Hebrews speaks of the effectiveness of the religion of the Old Testament which, inasmuch as it came from God, must be counted as superior to all the religions that have arisen from man's own quest for the Unseen. The Letter tells us

that “*All the priests stand at their duties every day, offering over and over again the same sacrifices that are quite incapable of taking sins away*” (Hebrews 10:11). If this is the case for the Hebrew religion, how much more is it so for the rest of the religions of man, worthy as they may be. But the case is utterly different for the religion of Jesus Christ, according to the same Letter. For “*Jesus, on the other hand, has offered one single sacrifice for sins, and then taken his place for ever, at the right hand of God, where he is now waiting until his enemies are made into a footstool for him.*” Why is this? Because, the inspired Letter tells us, “*By virtue of that one single offering he has achieved the eternal perfection of all whom he is sanctifying*” (Heb:10:13). The great British anthropologist, Evans Pritchard, once wrote that a religion can be understood from the perspective of its way of dealing with evil. Now, the greatest evil for man is sin. The answer to sin that has come from Heaven is the person and work of Christ, and the religion he revealed and established.



World Day of Prayer for Vocations (4th Sunday of Eastertide)

Entrance Antiphon Cf. Ps 33 (32):5-6 The merciful love of the Lord fills the earth; by the word of the Lord the heavens were made, alleluia.

Collect Almighty ever-living God, lead us to a share in the joys of heaven, so that the humble flock may reach where the brave Shepherd has gone before. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Scripture today: Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Psalm 23: 1-6;
1 Peter 2:20b-25; John 10:1-10

“Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When

he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice." Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them. Therefore Jesus said again, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (John 10:1-10)

Prayer for the priesthood In today's Gospel we are presented with our Lord's use of the biblical image, present not only in the New Testament but in the Old as well, of God who is the Shepherd of his people. The fold of God's sheep, then, is precisely his chosen people. The Old Testament condemned those false and neglectful shepherds of the sheep of the fold of God. Our Lord in today's

Gospel addresses himself to the Pharisees, the neglectful shepherds, and he speaks of himself as the only gate into the fold of God. True shepherds of God's sheep enter by him who is the Gate. All shepherds must enter by this Gate, and the one who enters by some other way intends to steal the sheep from their true Shepherd who is God. The message to the Pharisees was clear. They envied our Lord for the command he had over the minds and hearts of the people. They wanted the sheep for themselves, and because they refused to go to the sheep through him, they were thieves, stealing the sheep from God the Good Shepherd. In a separate parable, our Lord states that he himself is the Good Shepherd, but here he is the Gate. Indeed, he is the only Gate. A major feature of modern religion is that it tends to think of Christ as just one of several ways to God. It is a curious coincidence that in an age marked by secularism and religious agnosticism, religion has rarely been studied more than it is now. In Australia, Religion can be studied throughout secondary schooling, and taken (say, in NSW) as an examinable

subject for the Higher School Certificate or its equivalent. Religious studies can be pursued at most universities, and an academic career can be made of it by persons with little personal religion of their own. At the same time, the assumption is widely entrenched that there is no objective truth in the tenets of religion. Religion is a matter of personal preference, and all belief systems are equally valid as ways to the Ultimate, whatever the Ultimate is. The way of Mahomet is one way, that of Buddha another, that of traditional primal religion another, and Christianity too is but one way to God. To claim that Christ is the only way is preposterous. What matters is not your “religious opinion,” but your sincerity of belief. But Christ says something very different from this. He alone is the Gate to the “pasture,” and all must pass through him.

At the Last Supper, Christ told his disciples that he alone is *the way to the Father*. He is *the Way, the Truth, and the Life*. He has come to offer us *life in abundance*, the life that comes from God. This then is the aim of life, to be united with our Lord and to come to know him

personally. *Eternal life is this*, our Lord prayed at the Last Supper, *to know you, Father, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent*. Every member of the Church has the mission to represent Christ and the Church in everyday life, so as to lead as many as possible to enter by the one and only Gate of the one and only sheepfold. By passing through that Gate, abundant life will be attained. That abundant life, that “pasture,” is union with the one and only Shepherd of our souls. In a special way, it is the ordained priest who makes present and represents the Good Shepherd. He will do this, provided he always passes through the one and only Gate, indeed provided he himself represents that one and only Gate of the sheepfold. That is why the Church celebrates World Day of Prayer for Vocations, on this fourth Sunday of Eastertide. The Church wishes to remind all the faithful that all are responsible for the promotion of vocations to the priesthood and the religious life, especially the priesthood. In a unique sense, the ordained priest stands in the place of Christ who is both the Good Shepherd and the one Gate of the Sheepfold. Let every

family and every member of Christ's faithful consider regularly praying for vocations to the ordained priesthood. Every parent ought pray for the gift of a vocation within his or her family. Every Catholic ought think and speak with reverence for the ordained priesthood. The priesthood comes directly from our Lord as his creation. He has made so much of the spiritual life of the Church to depend on priests, who lead all through him, the one Gate, to pasture. If a parish loves the priesthood, prays for priests, assists the efforts of priests, praying all the while for vocations, that parish can expect vocations to the priesthood to come forth from within its midst.

Pope John Paul II once wrote a prayer for vocations: *“Jesus, Son of God, in whom the fullness of the Divinity dwells, you call all the baptised to ‘put out into the deep’, taking the path that leads to holiness. Waken in the hearts of young people the desire to be witnesses in the world of today to the power of your love. Fill them with your Spirit of fortitude and prudence, so that they may be able to discover the full truth about themselves and their own*

vocation. Our Saviour, sent by the Father to reveal His merciful love, give to your Church the gift of young people who are ready to put out into the deep, to be the sign among their brothers of your presence which renews and saves. Virgin Mother of the Redeemer, sure guide on the way towards God and towards neighbour, you who pondered his word in the depth of your heart, sustain with your motherly intercession our families and our ecclesial communities so that they may help adolescents and young people to answer generously the call of the Lord. Amen.”



The Day of The Fallen (e.g. ANZAC Day, April 25th in Australia)

(The Feast of St Mark is transferred to April 26th in Australia)

Entrance Antiphon Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord. Let them rest from their labours, for their good deeds go with them.

Collect Almighty everlasting God, who sent your Son to die that we might live, grant, we pray, eternal rest, to those who gave themselves in service and sacrifice for their country. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

ANZAC Day is a national day of remembrance in Australia and New Zealand, and is commemorated by both countries on 25 April every year to honour members of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) who fought at Gallipoli in Turkey during World War I. It now

more broadly commemorates all those who died and served in military operations for their countries in all wars. Anzac Day is also observed in the Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa and Tonga.

Scripture today: There are many suggested readings.

The Gospel may be John 12:23-28 or John 14:23-29

Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be. The Father will honour whoever serves me. "I am troubled now. Yet what should I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it and will glorify it again." (John 12: 23-28)

The Fallen Among the saints' days of the Church's year, one of the most intriguing for me is the Feast of the Holy Innocents, soon after Christmas. They died because of hatred of Christ, and they have that in common with other martyrs celebrated during the Church's year. But they themselves knew nothing about Christ, nor why they were being put to death, nor did their grieving families. They had no choice in the matter, and in view of their ages they probably had little real power of choice anyway. In fact, they did not know much at all, for they were innocent infants — and we do not normally hold infants responsible for what they might do. Yet they are celebrated as saints of the Church's Year. Perhaps their parents now enjoy God in heaven precisely because of this sacrifice. Of course, in the first instance — as with every other saint — the Feast Day celebrates what *God has done* in the Holy Innocents being thus honoured. The life of a saint shows forth the *work of God* in his life, though the Church also honours the heroic co-operation with God's grace that marked the life of the saint. The celebration of the Holy Innocents shows

forth the work of God even more markedly because the Innocents themselves were not capable of active and deliberate co-operation. They are raised on high by God and in the life of the Church, and this reminds us all of the power and holiness of God that gathers up even little children. It also suggests other considerations. By setting forth on a pinnacle, as it were, the martyrdom of the Innocents, it shows forth the tremendous significance of the smallest actions involving the human person. It is possible that few outside the environs of Bethlehem took much notice of the event. Josephus mentions nothing of it — it may have involved no more than a handful of infants. But the fact that their unknowing sacrifice is celebrated by the Church century after century indicates that a good deed, however unknown or unrecognized by others, is celebrated in Heaven and will be rewarded abundantly — as was the good deed of the Holy Innocents. They unknowingly stood in for Christ and were given what was intended for him. So, God rewarded them.

All this is to say that one's good deeds, provided they are not vitiated by base and unworthy motivation (such as giving alms to gain the approval of men), will have their reward — even if the doer does not realize the eternal significance of his good deeds. What did the Holy Innocents know of Jesus Christ? Nothing — but they stood in for him and endured the suffering intended for him. So it is that they are celebrated in Heaven and on earth in the life of Christ's body, the Church. Now, all this is meant as an illustration and an introduction to a broader field involving human history *and its wars*. Specifically, we are thinking of those countless ordinary men and women who have died in defence of their country. We are not thinking of the leaders of those countries and of the wisdom or otherwise of their decision to go to war, a war that may have cost the lives of thousands upon thousands of ordinary souls. The fact was that these ordinary individuals, long since forgotten except by their families, died in defence of their countries. Let us not endeavour to determine the extent of the good in such a sacrifice — it

was an act in defence of others. We may confidently entrust such souls to the abundant mercy of God, and it is a good and wholesome thing to celebrate their sacrifice — knowing that God rewards the smallest good deed abundantly. The unknown soldier who paid the ultimate sacrifice and whose silent tomb lies in a distant country, or whose remains were never recovered, is in the hands of God. We may trust that his good deed in defence of others was not vitiated by base and unworthy motives, and that he went to his Maker having thus served his fellow-man — just as the Holy Innocents went to their Maker having served the King of kings. What is especially apposite is that the same King of kings and Lord of lords said that on Judgment Day we shall all hear the words, “*Whatever you did to the least of these brothers of mine you did to me*” (Matthew 25:40). How consoling is this! It is also a warning. Let Christ’s sacrifice for mankind on the Cross and every other sacrifice for others remind us that we too must serve our brothers.

It is an excellent thing that the supreme sacrifice by anyone for the sake of others — be it the one who dies in battle in defence of his countrymen, or whoever it is who dies for the sake of another — is honoured by all. We know that it is honoured and praised in Heaven too. Let us be reminded by our Gospel today (John 12: 23 28) of what life is all about: making the sacrifice entailed in loving God and in loving one's neighbour. This is the first and second commandments on which all the Law and the Prophets depend. The good news is that Christ has won for us the grace to do this in imitation of him who is our God.



Indigenous People's Sunday (1st Sunday of July)

(Entrance Antiphon, Collect and Readings are those of the Sunday on which this celebration falls)

For example:

At that time Jesus said, I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:25-30)

Christ our rest Let us take one country in our consideration of this topic — let it be Australia, and let us

think of indigenous Australians and the call of Christ to accord to them the consideration and dignity that is their due as God's children, deserving of both justice and charity. Australia has the blessing of being made up of a vast array of ethnic and cultural groupings. My own ancestors came from England, Ireland and Scotland. Some of them came out to Australia 200 years ago, and they came in a very difficult situation. The earliest, arriving in about 1792, came in chains, as it were, because she was a convict. At various stages in Australia's history people have come from every corner of the world, from Africa, Europe, Eastern Europe, Russia, South America and various parts of Asia such as the Philippines, China and Vietnam. They have come to extricate themselves from great difficulty, and to improve their lives and the lives of their children. But long before any of Europeans or their ancestors came to Australia there were people living in this continent. They were the Aboriginal people. They have been in Australia for thousands and thousands of years. Australia was their home from time immemorial. But

when the British came they were driven out of their ancestral lands, their culture disregarded and dismembered, and they were nearly destroyed. They were left as a wreck. For nearly 200 years this attrition continued, and the Aboriginal people and their descendants have been gradually recuperating from that terrible experience of the arrival of the Europeans. For much of Australia's history, little thought was given to what was happening to them. But in recent decades the whole country has come to realize that there is much to recognize and repair. Pope John Paul II said this to the Aboriginal people at Alice Springs when he visited Australia in November 1986, and his words are now famous: *"If you stay closely united, you are like a tree standing in the middle of a bush fire sweeping through the timber. The leaves are scorched and burned; but inside the tree the sap is still flowing, and under the ground the roots are still strong. Like that tree you have endured the flames, and you still have the power to be reborn. The time for that rebirth is now!"*

That papal speech was celebrated at various times by the Australian Aboriginal population. It was a speech that manifested the concern of our Lord for their plight, and every year in Australia the Church wants Christ's faithful to consider their situation. Their situation has a special character because of their dignity as this land's first and longest inhabitants. It is also special in view of their deprivation of their ancestral home, and the generations of attacks on their culture which followed. They have a right to the protection of the best of their culture and to some ongoing recompense for the plight that enveloped them as a result of what seemed, both then and ever since, an unexpected, overwhelming and unjust invasion. They have a right to be helped to rebuild their culture and take their place with all the normal advantages of living in this fortunate country of ours. It is imperative that a Christian have genuine respect for the best of any people's culture. This is even more so for the Catholic who has the advantage of the Church's developed teaching on the dignity of culture and how it can become the receptacle and

vehicle of divine revelation. When we think of the Australian Aboriginal people, or hear of them referred to, we ought use the occasion to think of them with the mind of Christ and aspire, in union with Christ, to do what Christ would have us do for them. Of course, the greatest thing we can do for any person is to bring to that person the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ. *Eternal life is this*, our Lord prays in the Last Supper, *to know you, Father, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent*. In our Gospel passage today (Matthew 11: 25-30), we read our Lord's strikingly beautiful words inviting all those who labour and are overburdened to come to him. He will give them rest. He invites all to shoulder his yoke, to follow him along his way with all that will be involved. If we do, and if we make it our business to learn from him, we will find rest for our souls. Our happiness lies in being Christ's friends. That applies to each of us and to every person on the face of the earth, including our Aboriginal brothers and sisters who were given this land by God long before any of us. In

God's plan, Christ is their greatest treasure, their greatest rest and their greatest joy.

Let each of us hear the words of Christ in today's Gospel and take them to heart. Let us resolve to belong to our Lord entirely and to do what we can to bring the message of our Lord's words today to others. Let us pray that the Aboriginal people will find the rest for their souls that our Lord promises by coming to him and learning from him. Christ is found above all in the Church he founded. Let us resolve to do whatever in the future may enable us to show forth the true face of Jesus Christ to all in our country, including the Aboriginal people of Australia. Christ is the One whom we all need. It is he who brings us life, life in abundance.



Refugee-Migrant Sunday (Celebrated in August in Australia)

(Celebrated in January internationally, in other months in various countries)

Entrance Antiphon, Collect and Scripture readings of the Sunday on which this is observed.

(A possible special reading may be the following:)

Matthew 25:31-46

Jesus said to his disciples, When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me

something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’ Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’ They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ He will reply, ‘I

tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life. (Matthew 25:31-46)

The migrant and refugee Cain was “*a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth*”, a man who was guilty of murdering his brother Abel, one who had gone “*away from the presence of the Lord*”. He was in some terror and saw that “*whoever finds me will slay me*”. It looks as if he repented, for the Lord intended that he be safe and protected despite his misdeed. “*The Lord said to him, ‘If any one slays Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.’ And the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him*” (Genesis 4:12-16). Cain might be called the first refugee and migrant featuring in Scripture after his own parents, Adam and Eve, who were driven out of their Garden of Eden because of their misdeed. The point that we may note here is that Cain carried “a mark” placed on him by the Lord to warn others against harming him. We may imagine a similar mark

having been placed on the countless refugees and migrants of the world over the ages. That mark is the fact of being a member and brother of the human race, a creature and child of God in whose image he has been created. Abraham was a migrant, too. We read that “*Terah was the father of Abram Terah took Abram his son and Lot ... and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan*” – choosing to settle in Haran instead. But God had other plans, for he “said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land I will show you’... So Abram went, as the Lord had told him” (Genesis 11:27-12:4). Abraham was a migrant, and because he obeyed and left his land and went to where God intended for him, the salvation of the world was ultimately effected. An incalculable good was brought to the world because of that particular migration, though nobody had the slightest inkling of this stunning blessing at the time — except Abraham, and he but vaguely. God has done great things in and through migration. Most notably, there was the deliverance of the

tribes of Israel from their oppression in Egypt. They were, we might say, refugees from Egypt — being pursued, indeed, to the Red Sea. Their migration signalled a new development in God's dealings with mankind. There came the covenant of Sinai, the beginning (in some sense) of the Torah, the Law, and God's special presence with his chosen people.

But these blessings, celebrated century after century and fulfilled in the new Passover of Christ, occurred in the midst of a migration of a people from Egypt through the wilderness to the Promised Land. It is an icon of the migration, let us call it, from death to life, from sin to holiness, from this life to the promised land of Heaven, made possible by Christ. In this sense we are all migrants from sin to life, from earth to heaven, refugees from the slavery of sin to the Promised Land of our heavenly Father. What it all shows is the dignity of migrants and migration, of refugees and flight from danger. Jesus Christ himself had to flee as a refugee: he did so at the prompting of Heaven. We read that "*an angel of the Lord appeared to*

Joseph in a dream and said, 'Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' With that, they fled to Egypt as refugees. They migrated, and had nothing with them. When Herod died they returned, but still as refugees, for Joseph *"was afraid to go there"* because Herod's son Archelaus was reigning over Judea — so they *"went and dwelt in a town called Nazareth"* in Galilee (Matthew 2:13-23). All this suggests the dignity of the migrant and refugee, most especially when we consider what Christ will say to each at the Last Judgment: *"I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me"*. This is because *"as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me"* (Matthew 25:35-40). Not only does Christ our God identify with the least fortunate, with the stranger who longs to be welcomed, but history itself suggests something of the plan of God in respect to migration. Perhaps the greatest secular phenomenon of the ancient world was the

establishment of the Roman Empire. It was a tremendous conquest noted for its endurance. The Roman Empire had a very long life, especially when we include its Eastern wing, the Byzantine Empire. The Roman Empire gave a unity to much of the known world and indisputably contributed to the spread of the blessings of Christ's redemptive work. The Empire facilitated migration, and Christ's disciples were migrants. Christ commanded his disciples to go to the whole world — migrating — and make disciples of all.

But notice what followed on the invading migration of the barbarian peoples bearing down on the Roman Empire during the fifth and sixth centuries. The migrating hordes broke up the Western Empire, and thus came into contact with the Church. Gradually the Church, over the so-called Dark Ages, conquered the barbarians for Christ and thus was Christian Europe born. The point, though, is that it was (a very destructive) migration which occasioned this gain for Jesus Christ. For instance, over the centuries the Vikings became Christian. The presence of migrants and

refugees among us is an occasion to serve Christ who in his love identifies with them, and history has shown it is an occasion to win new children in Christ for God our Father in heaven.



World Mission Sunday (Celebrated near the 2nd-last Sunday of October in Australia)

Entrance Antiphon, Collect and Scripture readings of the Sunday on which this is observed.

Possible texts (the Mass for the Spread of the Gospel):

Isaiah 2:1-5; Acts 11:19-26; Matthew 28:16-20

The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And lo, I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28:16-20)

Mission One of the striking features of the Gospel of St Matthew, from which our Gospel passage today is drawn, is the frequency of Christ's references to the kingdom of

heaven. Further, Christ's references are preceded by John the Baptist's reference to the kingdom of heaven: "*In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'*" (Matthew 3:1-2). There was One coming "*after me*" who "*is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry*" (3:11). Christ's baptism was immediately followed by the revelation of the Father from heaven and the descent of the Holy Spirit: clearly, Jesus was the central personage in the kingdom. Following our Lord's temptations in the wilderness, he "*began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'*" (4:17). With that, our Lord summoned to his side and to his mission the first of the Twelve, Peter, Andrew, James and John: "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (4: 18-22). The advance of the kingdom was beginning. The Sermon on the Mount is generally considered as Matthew's summary of Christ's teaching, doubtlessly given on the Mount but at the same time bringing together Christ's teaching given on various occasions during his public ministry. It contains some

seven references to entrance into and life within the kingdom of heaven. In fact, Matthew's Gospel contains some fifty references to the kingdom of heaven. This abundance is reflected in Mark and Luke — although they favour the expression "*kingdom of God*." There are some references to "*the kingdom of God*" in the Gospel of St John, Acts, the Letters of St Paul, Revelation and the other Letters. Matthew contains more references than any other New Testament writing, although Luke, not far behind him, favours the expression "*kingdom of God*." Especially distinctive in Matthew's Gospel is Christ's introduction to his founding of the Church. He appoints Simon as the visible Rock of his Church, and, importantly, gives to him "*the keys of the kingdom of heaven*." The powers of Hell will not prevail against his Church, for it possesses the "keys".

The "kingdom of heaven" is what Christ came to found, establish and extend across the face of the earth during the age to come, and his Church is of critical importance in the matter of access to the kingdom. As he said to Pontius

Pilate, his kingdom is not of this world, and as he points out elsewhere, there is another kingdom — that of Satan. On one occasion when he was casting out demons, Christ was accused of doing so by being in league with Satan. Christ then referred to Satan's kingdom: *“So too with Satan: if he is divided against himself, how can his kingdom stand?... But if it is through the finger of God that I cast out devils, then know that the kingdom of God has overtaken you”* (Luke 11: 18-20). So there are two kingdoms that are not of this world, and each is strongly at work to gain universal dominion. That Satan is intent on gaining the kingdoms of this world is manifest in his temptation directed to Christ in the desert: *“The devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. ‘All this will I give you,’ he said, ‘if you will bow down and worship me’”* (Matthew 4:8). Christ absolutely rejected Satan's proposal, but that did not mean that he did not intend to conquer *“all the kingdoms of the world”*. He had this very intention, not in order to gain temporal glory and splendour, but so as to

hand the world over to his Father. There was the prophecy of Daniel to be fulfilled of the “*one like the son of man*” (7:13). The “*one like the son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and he came even to the Ancient of days, and they presented him before him. And he gave him power and glory, and a kingdom, and all peoples, tribes and tongues shall serve him. His power is an everlasting power that shall not be taken away, and his kingdom that shall not be destroyed*” (7:14). If ever there has been, is, and will be a mission, it is this. Thus is the vocation of the Christian to be a missionary one. It is precisely on this note that the Gospel of St Matthew ends. Christ has been given all authority on earth and in heaven, and he charges his disciples, the Church, to “*make disciples of all the nations*” (28:19).

As Matthew ends his Gospel, he points to the future. It is a future with Jesus Christ as Lord of heaven and of earth. Salvation will come to a person when he accepts this in faith, receives baptism, and observes “*all that I have commanded you*” (28:19-20). But very importantly, the

disciples receive the charge that is meant to distinguish the life of the Church and her members. *“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ... and behold, I am with you all days, even unto the end of the world”* (28:19-20). Each disciple of Christ who wishes to please the Master must take this mission seriously.



